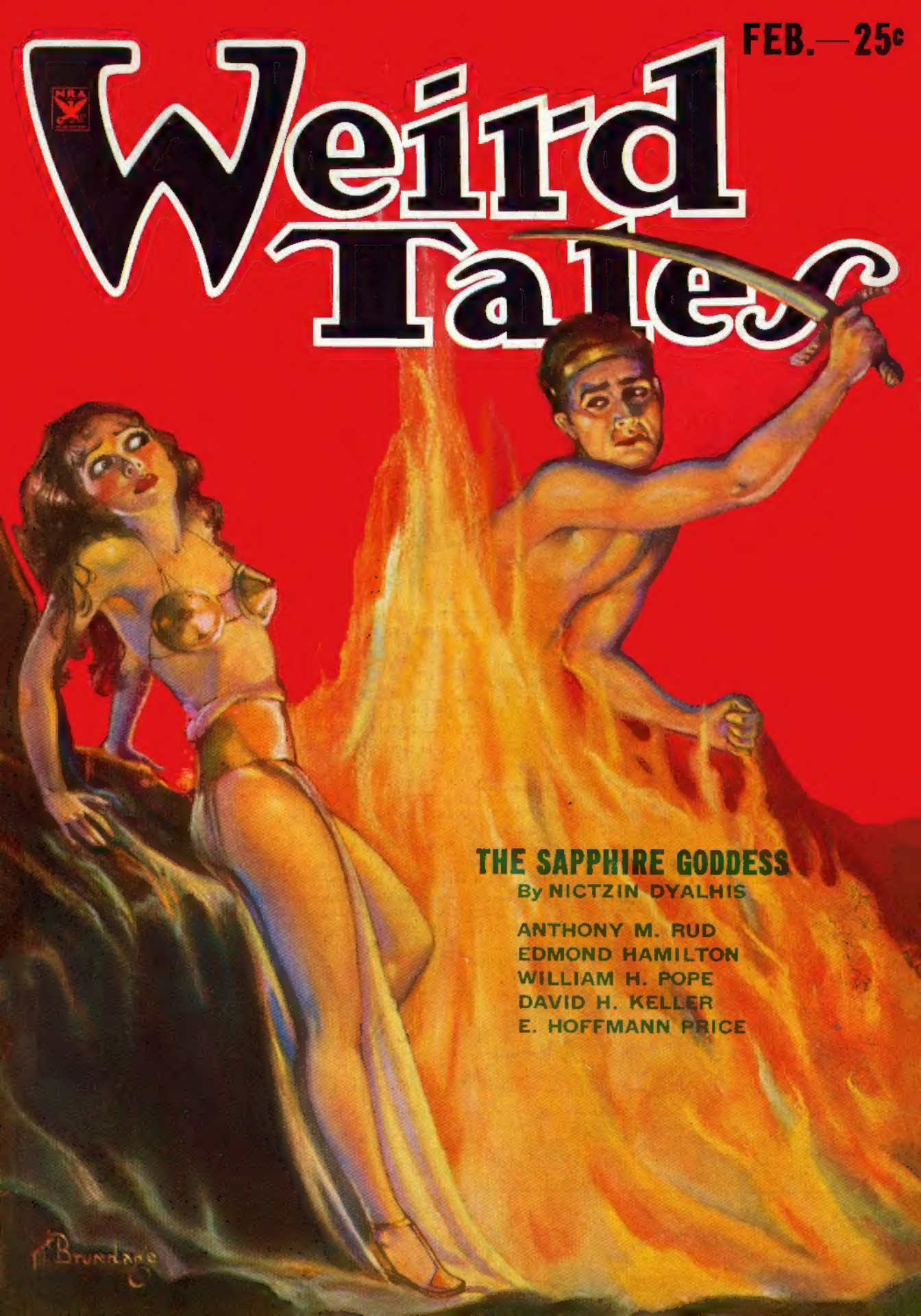
FEB.—25c
Weird Tales
THE SAPPHIRE GODDESS
By NICTZIN DYALHIS
ANTHONY M. RUD
EDMOND HAMILTON
WILLIAM H. POPE
DAVID H. KELLER
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Weird Tales

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Volume 23 CONTENTS FOR FEBRUARY, 1934 Number 2

Cover Design ..... M. Brundage
Illustrating a scene in "The Sapphire Goddess"

The Sapphire Goddess ..... Nictzin Dyalhis 146
A tale of terrific adventures in another dimension of space

The Virus of Hell ..... William H. Pope 167
A grim, prophetic story of fifty years hence, when Organized Crime rules the United States

The Valley of the Worm ..... Robert E. Howard 193
A hair-raising and fascinating weird story of the childhood of our race

Tarbis of the Lake ..... E. Hoffmann Price 208
She was a living, breathing woman with a living woman's passion—but what was the thing that lay in the mummy-case like a corpse within its coffin?

The Man Who Returned ..... Edmond Hamilton 219
The story of a man who was laid away in the tomb and returned to his friends

The Place of Hairy Death ..... Anthony Rud 229
A tale of a horde of poisonous spiders in a hidden treasure-room of the Mayas

To a Bullet-Pierced Skull ..... Alfred I. Tooke 235
Verse

The Solitary Hunters (part 2) ..... David H. Keller 236
A powerful novel of living death in the crater of an extinct volcano

The Witchcraft of Ulua ..... Clark Ashton Smith 253
A bizarre tale of the weird sendings of a wicked woman, and the luckless youth whom she entangled in her toils

Nocturne ..... Herbert Kaufman, Jr. 259
Verse

Weird Story Reprint:
The Sixth Tree ..... Edith Lichty Stewart 260
A fascinating story from WEIRD TALES of ten years ago

The Star-Gazer Climbs ..... Hazel Burden 263
Verse

The Eyrie 264
A chat with the readers

The Lantern ..... Hung Long Tom 272
Verse

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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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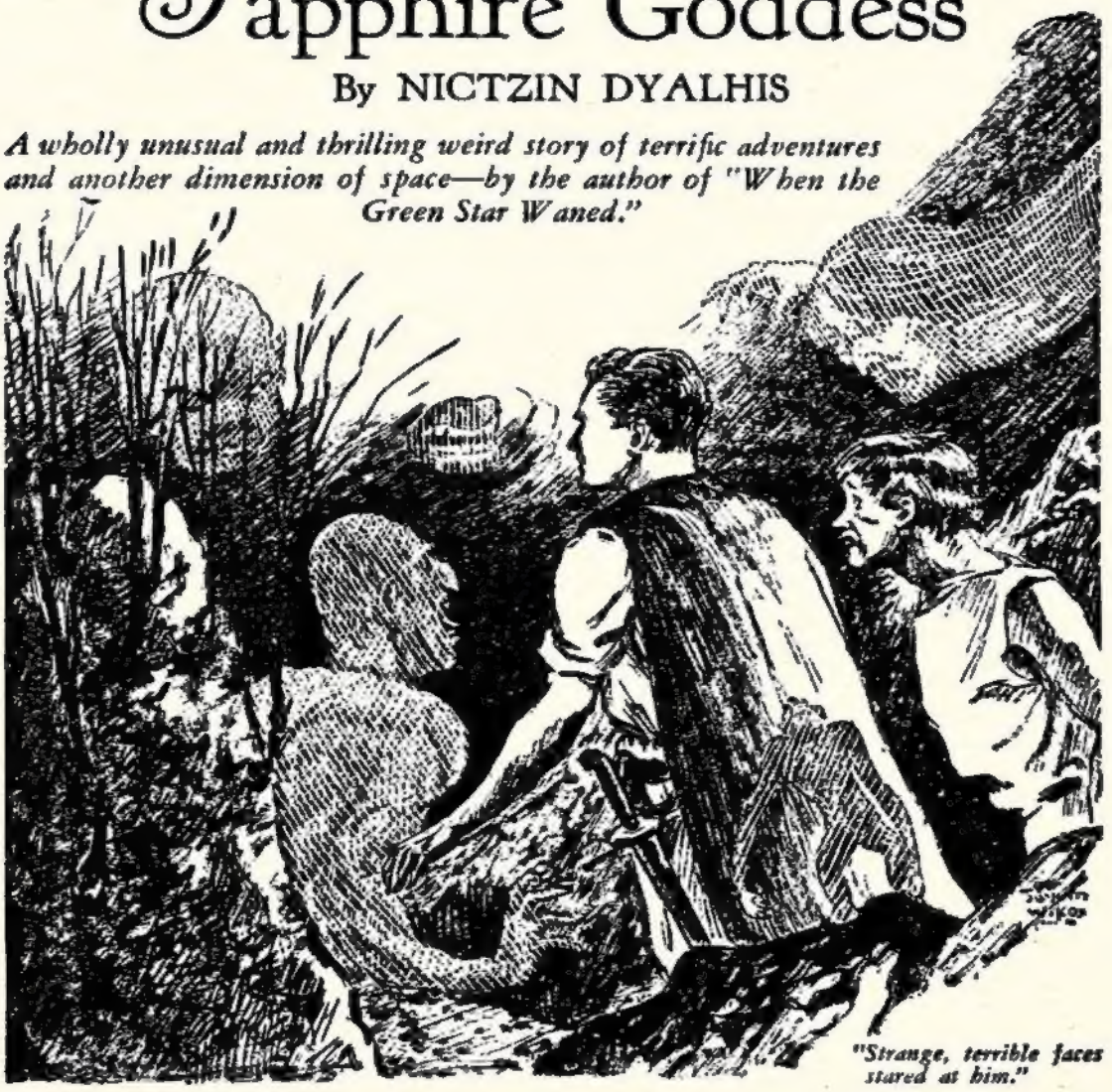
WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Sapphire Goddess

By NICTZIN DYALHIS

A wholly unusual and thrilling weird story of terrific adventures and another dimension of space—by the author of "When the Green Star Waned."



"Strange, terrible faces stared at him."

SUICIDE as a means of escaping trouble never appealed to me. I had studied the occult, and knew what consequences that course involved, afterward.

But I was fed up on life. I was destitute, and had no friends who might help, even were I to appeal to them. At forty-eight, one does not easily regain solvency. And, gradually, I'd lost all ambition. Not even hope remained.

If only there were some other road out—a door, for example, into the hypothetical region of four dimensions . . . it certainly couldn't be worse there than what I'd borne in the last three years. Well, I could try. . . .

I seated myself cross-legged on the floor. If I concentrated hard enough, perhaps the miracle might occur . . . at least I should have tried . . . a last resort. . . . Gradually a vague state ensued wherein I was not unconscious, for I still knew that I was *I;* yet a queer detach-

ment was mine—there was a world, but of it I was no longer a part. . . .

Click!

Like a movable panel a section of the wall opened, revealing a most peculiar corridor—a strange Being stood smiling at me. It did not speak, yet I caught the challenge: "Dare you?"

With a single movement I rose and stepped into the opening. . . .

Oh, the agonizing, excruciating torment of that transition! Every nerve, tissue and fiber flamed and froze simultaneously. My brain seethed like a superheated cauldron. My blood turned to corrosive, searing acid. Tears suffused my aching eyes. I choked, unable to utter the groans my sufferings constrained me to emit. . . .

Had I landed in Hell? It certainly seemed so! . . . Then abruptly it was all over. I was still *I*, yet vastly different. I was *free*—and with senses above the dull senses of Earth, with power beyond Earth's muscular strength. I realized that I was in a different realm where the Laws were strange to me, and that I must be careful lest I be caught in some trap from whence escape might not be so easily achieved. But where, I wondered, was the Being who had dared me? . . .

"Here!"

"But—you seem not the same . . . there was a vague, misty, red haze—now you are distinct. . . ."

"Many high-speed light-waves formed a veil through which earthly eyes can not see clearly."

"Hence—the agony during transition?"

"Precisely! The vibrations altered your atomic structure. But you are still your true self."

"Perhaps," I assented. "But who are you, and why did you make it possible for me to come?"

"I am Zarf; and your subjects need you, to say naught of——"

We were interrupted by a most discordant howling, and abruptly some two dozen hideous dwarfs surrounded us. They bore long straight swords, were clad in iridescent scale armor, stood about five feet in height, and had the ugliest faces I ever saw.

"King Karan of Octolan—and the commander of his bodyguard, Zarf!" Their voices were shrill with maniacal glee. Evidently they considered our capture a big event.

I did not like their looks. I did not approve of their air of insolent triumph. Back on Earth I had lost all material ambitions, but suddenly I regained one, and proceeded to realize it.

With all my new strength, I drove my clenched right fist into the face of a particularly burly dwarf standing about two feet away. His head snapped back, he went limp; I snatched his sword from him and set to work. Once and again I struck, caught the true balance of the weapon and saw a head leave its body—shouted:

"A sword for you, Zarf!"

Before the blade touched ground he caught it, then set his back against mine. . . . A wild delight filled me, yet through it I felt a vague wonder—where had *I* learned swordsmanship? For never on Earth had I held one in my hand!

Those dwarfs fought like fiends from Hell. More than once I felt the stinging kiss of dwarf steel. Once I heard Zarf gasp as a sword bit deep, and once he groaned in agony. It was a wild mêlée while it lasted; and never did I enjoy myself more. . . . Through a red haze of slaughter I saw that only two dwarfmen remained facing my blade. Lunge—slash—parry—slash and lunge again—but one left—I gathered myself—dimly saw

another blade than mine pass through that last dwarf—heard Zarf as from a far distance crying exultantly:

"Lord King, you fight even better than in the other days! It is well—for you will have many a fight ere you sit once more on the Chrysolite Throne of your race."

Then I slid to a limp heap on the ground, exhausted from loss of blood—I could not speak—heard Zarf cursing furiously, virulently; then all consciousness flickered out. . . .

I REGAINED my senses slowly. I lay on a pallet, a hand's breadth off a hard-packed earthen floor. A feeble lamp barely showed walls of stone chinked with moss and mud. Obviously a hut—but where? Then I saw Zarf. He sat on a low stool, chin on fist, elbow on knee, head bandaged, and his left arm in a sling. Looking at myself, I saw I was swathed worse than he in bandages.

"Zarf," I said weakly. "We look as if we'd been in a fight!"

"We have been," he nodded at cost of a twinge of pain. "But none of those Vulmins will ever take part in another—while we were just getting a little practise!"

"Zarf," I demanded, insistent. "Who are you, and why did you call me 'Master'? Surely there is some mistake. You know that I am but an Earthman upon whom you took pity and opened for him a door into this realm of Space. . . ."

Somberly he stared at me; then:

"King Karan, what pity was in the hearts of those Vulmin dwarf-devils when they strove to cut us into gobbets for their cook-pots? Yet they knew you and named you 'Karan of Octolan, Zarf's royal Master'. Is it possible you have no memory of the past—no knowledge of who and what you are? Do you not remember the rebel sorcerer, Djl Grm, who blasted your body and drove your self through a bent corridor down to the Earth, where you acquired a new body as an Earth-babe? Have you no recollection of your Imperial Consort? Shall that regal lady—so loved by all in your far-flung realm that she was deemed a goddess—be unavenged?

"What disposal that accursed sorcerer made of her, none knows. It is known that he sought to seduce her, and when she withstood him in that, she vanished! Yet sure I am he did not force her to the Earth, for then you twain might have found each other, and so defeated his major purpose. Nay, King Karan, she is *here!* In the nights her spirit whispers to mine:

" 'Zarf, I am still your Queen. Find my lord, wheresoever he be . . . watch over him . . . whenever possible, open for him a door. He will find me—free me—out of his love. . . .'

"King Karan, must that regal lady's spirit wait in vain, believing Zarf a traitor, and you a recreant spouse?"

"I can not remember," I groaned. I was convinced—believed Zarf fully; and oh! the anguish that was mine in that moment! Amnesia, it is called back on Earth, this inability to remember, with its concommitant of lost identity. . . . Then in the gloom of my mind, one insurmountable objection reared its ugly head, "If this sorcerer blasted my body, and drove my self down to the Earth, where through the medium of birth I regained a body and grew to my present stature—how shall any here recognize me as Karan the King of Octolan? Zarf, I still say you must be mistaken."

"My King," he replied pityingly, "you *are* sore bemazed! On Earth your body was shapen by parental influence; but *here*—when the agony shook you, the

body reassembled about the self in its true semblance and substance. Nay! Karan of Octolan you are, and none who ever saw you during your reign would deny your identity, albeit there be many would gladly slay you to prevent you from regaining your throne.

"Lord, evil rules where once was good—and a fair, happy land has become a veritable antechamber of Hell. Vampyr and ghoul prey on the bodies of your people. Foes assail them from without, and devils plague them from within the borders. Your subjects, afraid, disheartened, hopeless, have fallen from their allegiance to the Karanate Dynasty. Scarce may we find a hundred loyal souls in all the eight provinces of Octolan. I myself am but a fugitive; and rich is the reward Djl Grm would pay for the head of Zarf the Proscribed! And as for our gracious Queen, Mehul-Ira——"

He groaned in heaviness of spirit; and I felt two scalding tears run adown my cheeks.

"I can not remember," I wailed. "Karan I may be, but I have not his memory! A great King would I be, and a wondrous leader—with Karan's body and an Earthman's mind!" And I sank back on my bed all atremble from sheer, impotent fury at myself.

Zarf pondered for an interminable while; then:

"Lord, it would seem that Djl Grm, ere he drove your self to the Earth, laid an inhibition on your memory-coil. And if so, we may be sure he will never release it. But, Lord, it comes to my mind that afar from here dwells another magician—Agnor Halit—fully as evil as Djl Grm, and also fully as powerful. It may well be that he can restore your memory—but it remains to be seen if he will. It is said that they hate each other as only two sorcerers can hate. And in that lies our hope. I think we would do well to start as soon as we are fit to travel, seek out this Agnor Halit, and try to enlist his aid."

"So be it," I assented. "Only, we start at dawn. Are we women, that we should lie at ease because of a few scratches?"

"But you are weak from your wounds," he objected.

"No more so than are you," I retorted. "As I say, we start at dawn. If I am indeed your King, it is for me to command—yours to obey! But for tonight, we sleep—if it be safe to sleep here."

"You will never be safe," he replied, "waking or sleeping, until you are once again on the Chrysolite Throne, surrounded by your own bodyguards. Still, we can take some small precautions to prevent a complete surprize."

He picked up a metal basin and two sticks, with which he rigged a device against the door, which would fall and make a noise were the door tampered with.

"There," he grunted. "Now we can sleep—and we need it!"

THE clatter of the falling basin awoke me. I came erect, sword in hand, although I was wavering on my feet. Zarf looked at me in pity, but said naught. Slowly the door swung open, and a most grotesque visage peered in. Zarf audibly sighed his relief.

"Come in, good Koto," he invited soothingly, as one might speak to a timid child. "King Karan will do you no harm. Nor will I." And out of the corner of his mouth Zarf muttered—"Koto owns this hovel. He is a Hybrid, born of a lost woman of the Rodar race and an Elemental of the Red Wilderness. Yet Koto is very gentle and timid. Nor is he such a fool as he looks, for when I told him your identity, the poor creature wept because his hovel was no fit abode for royalty,

even in distress. All his life long, Koto will be proud——"

"These 'Rodars'?" I asked, softly. "And this 'Red Wilderness'?"

"The Rodars? Gigantic savages, running naked. Gentle enough, and with child-like brains; and the Red Wilderness is a vast and dreary desert, all yours, but totally worthless."

"Enter, good Koto," I commanded. "I, Karan, King of Octolan, bid you enter and kneel before me."

With a snivelling howl the poor wretch of a Hybrid blundered in awkwardly and flopped asprawl before me. He grasped his head in both ape-like paws, looked at Zarf out of terror-filled eyes, opened his ugly gash of a mouth, and emitted a raucous howl. In a perfect paroxysm of fright he gabbled:

"I knew it! I knew it! This hut is unfit for King Karan the Splendid! And now he will cut off Koto's head with his sword—cut off Zarf's head, too, King Karan! He made me take you in——"

"But you are mistaken, good Koto," I assured the poor fellow. "I have no intent to cut off your head—nor Zarf's."

Then I tapped him on the shoulder with the flat of my blade.

"Rise, Baron Koto, Lord of the Red Wilderness and of all the Rodar-folk that therein dwell. Thus I, Karan, reward your service in giving us succor in our need!"

Zarf became angry at the audacity of my act. To him it was nigh to an insult to the entire order of knighthood. Then, abruptly, he laughed.

"Lord," he gasped, "had another than yourself wrought thus, I'd slay him with my own hand. But such pranks were ever your wont in the other days. Mad as is this one, still it may yet serve you well. You are too weak to travel, despite your bold heart, and we needs must wait in this castle of Baron Koto's until strength returns to us both. Perchance by then Koto may be able to secure for us riding-beasts on which we may travel faster than on our own legs."

At that last argument I capitulated. It was a good reason for waiting. But then I began to question Zarf about our intended journey.

"What manner of territory must we traverse, once we start? What sort of inhabitants dwell along our ways? Savage, or civilized? Wild, tame? Hostile or friendly? And will our swords be sufficient for our protection?"

"It will be a long and dangerous trip," he replied soberly. "Our way lies across this same Red Wilderness you just presented to Koto; thence across the Sea of the Dead, where evil ghosts arise from the foul waters; then over the Hills of Flint to the Mountains of Horror, where demons and vampyrs abound; and thence onward again to a city of devils who adore the lord of all devils. There, if we are fortunate, we may hope to find the sorcerer we seek."

"Cheerful prospect!" I commented acridly. "But are these assorted Hell-spawn sufficiently solid to be cut with good steel, or are they immune to injury?"

"Some are solid enough, while others are intangible, yet dangerous for all that. And there be various tribes of savages, none friendly to strangers. Oh, we may anticipate a most enjoyable trip!"

"Zarf," I demanded abruptly, thinking longingly of the guns and pistols of Earth —"Can you return me to Earth for a brief visit, and then bring me back here, together with certain heavy bundles? Also, can you provide me with gold or gems in quantity?"

"Lord," he mourned, "naught have I to give you saving my life and my love. Nor gold nor gems do I possess, or you

should have all with no need of asking. Nor can I return you to Earth—but why do you so suddenly wish to go?"

I explained, and he understood, but reiterated his inability to do as I requested.

"Those *'ghunz,'*" he marveled, enviously—"What a pity we have them not. Throwing-spears and knives are our nearest approach."

"Koto," I interrupted Zarf, a new idea arising in my mind. "Do you have a wood that will do like this, when seasoned?" I drew my sword, bent it in an arc, and let it spring swiftly back.

Koto nodded, then shambled from the hut. I heard sounds of wood being split, and presently Koto was back with a long strip of hard wood which he handed me deprecatingly. I was overjoyed, for it was precisely what I needed.

"Bows and arrows," I exulted. "Now I feel better! Zarf, we have reason to remain here for a while."

Rapidly I explained, using a pointed stick to make clear my meaning, by drawing in the dirt of the floor. I had been an archery enthusiast on Earth, and knew my subject, even if I had never handled a sword.

DESPITE my earlier urgency, it was three weeks before we three men set forth from Koto's castle on the edge of the Red Wilderness. Three men, because Koto had protested with lugubrious howls that he wasn't going to be left behind. I'd made him a Baron, he claimed, and it was his right to ride with me when I went forth to war! Zarf chuckled in grim approval, and I, too, endorsed Koto's claim.

We rode the queerest steeds imaginable. Huge birds they were, more like enormous game-cocks than aught else I can compare them to; with longer, thicker spurs and bigger beaks. Ugly-tempered, too. Zarf said they'd fight viciously whenever it came to close quarters. And how those big birds could run!

I asked Koto where he got them, and he replied that he'd gone out one dark night and taken them from a flock kept by a petty lordling some distance away. When I laughed and called him a thief, he said seriously he was no such thing:

"Was not Karan the King in need of them? And did not the kingdom and all that therein was belong to the King?"

So we rode forth, all three mounted and armed with short, thick, powerful bows and thick, heavy arrows. Zarf and I had the swords we had taken from the Vulmins, and Koto bore a ponderous war-club fashioned from a young tree having a natural bulge at the big end. Into this bulge he had driven a dozen bronze spikes all greenish with verdigris—a most efficient and terrible weapon, if he had the courage to use it in hand-to-hand fighting. Zarf maintained that Koto would be so anxious to please me that he'd fight like a maniacal fiend, should the opportunity present.

The crossing of that Red Wilderness was no pleasure jaunt. There were dust storms and blistering heat by day, and an icy wind o' nights that howled like all the devils of Hell let loose. But in time we came to the shore of the Sea of the Dead; and a most fitting name it was for that desolate body of putrescent water.

Dull grayish-greenish water, sullenly heaving and surging to and fro sluggishly and greasily; beaches of dull grayish-brownish sands; and huge dull grayish-blackish boulders and rocks—oh! a most nightmarish picture, taken all in all.

"Zarf," I shuddered, "may it not be possible to ride around this Sea?"

"Perhaps," he returned, dubiously. "But we can cross it in one quarter of the time it would take to ride around."

"But," I queried skeptically, "how

shall we cross? I see no boats, nor any way of making any."

"I have heard of a tribe hereabouts," he replied slowly, "and it may be that we can barter for, seize, or compel them to make for us a craft that will bear us over this pestilential sea. But now we had best think about making camp for the night."

We rode back from the beach until the sea was lost to view—and smell. A pleased cry from Koto finally caused us to halt. Where a mass of boulders had been piled up by some ancient cataclysm, there was a cave-like recess sufficiently large to afford safe refuge for all three of us and our mounts.

What had pleased Koto particularly was the presence of a lot of lumps resembling amber, but of a queer red color. After he had collected sufficient to satisfy his ideas, he laid a line of the stuff across the entrance, and set fire to them. They burned like coal or gum, and gave off a clear pale white flame, and a most pleasant odor, with no smoke.

"This region is infested with devils at night," Koto said seriously. "But no devil will ever dare pass that line of fire."

He was right. No devil did pass, but after darkness came, a lot of them tried. Failing in that laudable attempt, they drew anigh the opening, and stared in avidly at us. . . .

We divided the night into three watches. Zarf and I wrapped ourselves in our cloaks and slept, nor did aught disturb our rest. But Koto, when he wakened me, said he had seen plenty of devils moving about beyond the line of fire. Then he rolled himself up, and so became immovable. But I, hearing no snores, grew suspicious of such somnolence, considering that he had snored like a thunderstorm incarnate since we started from his castle. Finally I tricked him into betraying himself. With a jerk of my head I summoned him to my side.

"Koto, do you think your King unfit to keep guard, that you lie awake?"

"Lord," he replied, "there be many devils about, and some be very dangerous—tricky, too. I know their ways better than you do, and can better cope with them. Also, I await the greatest one of all, for I would talk with him on a certain matter."

"Your father, Koto?"

"Yes, my King. Koto sent him word by a lesser devil, and he will surely come."

"Koto," I demanded sternly, "would you betray your King?"

"Nay, I seek to serve my Master." He stared at me in hurt surprize. Ashamed of my suspicion, I made amends.

"I thank my Baron! Koto, have I your permission to see this father of yours?"

"So be it," he assented, after pondering the matter for a while. "But first I must tell him, or he will be angry."

A long interval passed. Out of the blackness beyond the fire two enormous crimson eyes glared balefully. Koto calmly arose, stepped across the glowing line of the Fire of Safety, and walked off in the darkness toward those glowing orbs. A thousand misgivings assailed me. I strained my eyes, but could see naught. Even the crimson eyes had vanished. Only one comfort did I have—if harm came to Koto, his howls would surely apprise me of his danger. So I strained my ears, but no faintest whisper came. Then, after an eon of suspense, Koto calmly returned, and muttered:

"Now if King Karan wishes to see Koto's father—come! He is very terrible to behold, but he has promised Koto that King Karan shall be unharmed. But do not awaken Zarf—yet!"

It took all the hardihood I could muster to step across the line of fire and walk out into that fiend-infested dark. Koto minded it far less than I. There was evil in the very air. Strange, terrible faces stared at me, half-heard voices moaned and gibbered in my ears, clammy hands grasped at my arms and clothing, yet could not hold. Once a pair of icy cold lips kissed me full on my mouth; and oh! the foul effluvium of that breath! . . . Abruptly, Koto halted. A huge mass of black seen against the murky blackness of the night barred further progress. We stood immovable, waiting—for what? After a bit I grew impatient, weary of standing like a rock, and reached for my sword.

"Well," I demanded of Koto. "What is this holding us here? And where is this mighty father of yours? I am minded to try my sword on this black barrier and find out if it be impassable."

Before he could reply—the black barrier was not! Only, two eyes that were crimson fires of hellishness were staring into mine from a distance of mere inches . . . no face, no form . . . just vacant air —and two eyes. With a snort of disgust, I turned my back to the phenomenon.

"Koto," I said severely, "I am Karan, rightful King of Octolan. I am not interested in child's play, nor am I to be frightened by any Elemental, devil, goblin, or fiend in all my realm. I am *their* King as well as yours! Let this father of yours show respect, or we return to our shelter. . . ."

A Being stood facing me! It was taller than Koto or I, albeit no giant. Yet I knew that an Elemental was capable of assuming, at will, any form it might choose. Its features were wholly nonhuman; at the same time its expression was in nowise repulsive, nor was it fear-inspiring. But there were unmistakable power and mastery stamped thereon and shining in its great, glowing eyes.

It was staring at me coldly, impersonally, with no sign of hostility, friendliness, or even curiosity; and I stared back at it with precisely the same attitude. If it sought to overawe me, it was badly mistaken. Then I realized it was telepathically reading my soul. And strangely, I began to grasp some insight into its nature, likewise.

"Truly, you are King Karan of Octolan, returned to regain your own. And I, to whom past, present and future are one and the same, tell you that you will succeed in all you undertake. Aye! And more than you now dream. And because you have treated Koto as a man, and will eventually make of him one of whom I may yet be proud, I will transport you, Koto, that grim Zarf of yours, and your mounts as well, across the Sea of the Dead, and beyond the Hills of Flint. But across the Mountains of Horror you three must fight your own way. Certain powers of Nature I control, and naught do I fear; but there is an ancient pact between that magician whom you seek, and me. Therefore I will not anger him by taking you into his realms, uninvited.

"Yet this I tell you for your further guidance—he will demand of you a service. Give it, and all shall go well with your plans. Refuse it, and all the days of your life you will regret that refusal. At dawn, be in readiness, and I will carry out my promise. Fear not, whatever happens, for my ways are none that you can understand, even were I to explain them. And now, farewell till dawn!"

And with that—I stood, facing nothing! Koto's father had simply vanished.

Returning to the cave, we found a badly worried Zarf awake and cursing luridly. But he became considerably mollified when I explained, although he shook his

head dubiously regarding Koto's father and his proffered assistance.

"His aid will more likely get us in trouble than help us out of it," he grumbled. "Still, as no better course presents, I suppose we will have to accept and run all chances."

AT THE first flush of dawn we were mounted and waiting. We noted that the air held a peculiar quality, indescribable, yet familiar, somewhat like the odor caused by a levin-bolt striking too close for comfort. Also, there came a strange, murky tinge in the air—a faint moan—icy winds—a howling, shrieking, roaring fury like all the tormented souls in Hell voicing their agonies—sand, dust and small pebbles tore past us—the world abruptly vanished, together with my companions, so far as I knew—naught remained—I was choked by dust and my eyes were blinded—I was dizzy and bemazed—I knew not for certain if I were alive or dead and buried—acute misery was the sole thing I was conscious of.

My mount stumbled and fell asprawl. I lurched to my feet, gasped, retched violently, and presently felt better. I stared about me, bewildered. Zarf and Koto were just scrambling to their feet, and facing us was Koto's father. And the great Elemental had a smile on his lips, and in his eyes a light of actual friendliness.

"Lord Karan, back of you are the Sea of the Dead and the Hills of Flint; and before you lie the Mountains of Horror. I have kept my promise to the King my son follows and honors. Farewell."

And before I could voice my gratitude, he was gone—as seemed a habit with him. One instant visible, then—vacancy!

"I know much about my father," Koto said slowly. "But I never knew he could do this."

A FAINT trail ran down into a wide valley, on the far side of which loomed the mighty ramparts of the Mountains of Horror. And they merited the appellation. They were evil, and evil dwelt in them.

Soon the dim trail became a wide road, albeit ancient and in dire need of repair. I do not believe it had been traveled for ages, until we came; the natural conclusion being that whatever race built it had passed into oblivion, leaving their handiwork to mark their passing.

As the day drew to its close, the road led us into the ruins of an ancient city. Not one stone stood atop of another. We decided to camp there for the night, and while Koto pitched camp and prepared a meal, I strolled about the ruins.

Everywhere I looked were slabs that were covered with petroglyphs. Whatever the race, they had had a written language, and moreover, they had been prone to embellishment. They must have been, like the old Egyptians, dominated by a priesthood, to judge by the character of the many pictures illustrating the graven text. But if those same pictures were aught to go by, their gods must have been born from a union of a nightmare and a homicidal maniac's frenzy! It gave me the chill creeps just to look at those pictures, so foul and unholy were the rites and acts depicted.

IT WAS during my watch. My companions snored in a most inharmonious concert; and while I was in nowise asleep, I had drifted into a sort of revery. Slowly I became aware of a pair of eyes gleaming with opalescent lights, staring across the fire at me. Thinking it might be Koto's father, I spoke low-voiced in greeting. But as no reply came, I grew angry and asked who it was and what it wanted. Again no reply, so I snatched up my short

bow and drove an arrow beneath those glowing orbs.

A silvery laugh was my only reward. A hard-driven arrow is no laughing matter, but anything could happen in this accursed land, I decided.

"The little death-wand has no power to harm me," a voice asserted in those same silvery tones. "Nay, O Stranger; how may you slay one who died ages agone—but who still lives—and rules?"

"So that little 'death-wand' may not slay you," I snarled. "Well, we'll see what this will do!" And my sword leaped in a whistling cut across the tiny fire. Had there been a head and body there, they must have parted company! But the blade encountered—air!

Across the fire, smiling indulgently, as might one tolerantly amused by the tantrums of an otherwise interesting child, there sat a resplendently beautiful woman, a vivid, gorgeous brunette, with a slightly greenish tinge shimmering over her slender gold-bronze hued body. Her attire, a merest wisp of some pearly glimmering gossamer fabric, accentuated every personal charm of her exquisite form.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

"A Princess of Hell I am, yet having dominance here on this region, likewise. Ages agone I ruled in this city when it was in its height and glory. But there arose among the priests a mighty magician whose power became greater than mine. Quakes and fire and flood he loosed upon me and my people—and we became that which no more is—yet destroy us wholly he could not.

"So it is but a city of ruins you now behold, wherein, as ghosts, my people dwell; and I, a ghost, too, abide with them part of my time, and rule over a ghostly people and a wrecked city."

"If you are a ghost, you look like an extremely tangible one," I stated bluntly.

"Yes?" and she laughed in derision. "Was it an 'extremely tangible' ghost against which you tried two different death-wands? Still you are correct, in part. I am tangible enough now, as you may prove for yourself, should you care to do so. I build my body as I need it, or revert it to vapor when its use is over. Child's play, to my magic, O Stranger. . . . You disbelieve? See!"

She arose, a vision of alluring loveliness, passed deliberately through the fire, and seated herself at my side so closely that I could sense the magnetic radiations of her.

"You may touch me, take me in your arms if you will, kiss my lips till your blood is aflame, and cool your ardor in my embrace, nor shall you find me unresponsive!"

Her rounded arms stole about my neck like soft, satiny serpents.

"So," she murmured. "Am I not tangible? Desirable, too? Take me, and I will be to you as no other, woman, or spirit, or ghost, fiend, devil, or angel in all the universe can ever be! Power and wisdom and rulership will I place at your command . . . love and passion undreamed hitherto——"

I had sat immovable, silent up to that point—but suddenly I made up for lost time. A violent shove sent her asprawl, squarely into the fire; and from my lips came a word so descriptive that Earth's vilest would have blushed in outraged modesty had that epithet been applied.

But the seductively lovely Princess of Hell evidently took the word as a compliment. And if she were angry at being shoved into the fire, she showed no sign thereof. Out from the flames she glided, more alluring than ever; not a hair of her dusky tresses disturbed; with never a blemish on her gold-bronze skin;

and with a provocative smile on her curving lips.

"What you have called me—I would be even that, for you," she sighed languorously. "You and I were meant for each other since ever Eternity began——"

But at that, I exploded! Meant for that she-devil? *I?* My hand shot out, seizing her slender throat in a vise-like grip, mercilessly.

"You——!" The word was even worse than the first epithet I had used. "Since arrow and sword fail, let's see what choking will do!"

I tightened my clutch, putting forth all my strength. For good measure, I drove my fist into her face—and nearly dislocated my arm! For the Princess of Hell, she-fiend—ghost—woman—or whatsoever she really was, or had been, simply wasn't there! In fact, I wondered if she'd ever been there, or had I dozed, and dreamed? . . .

"IT WAS no dream, King Karan!"

The voice was full, sonorous, pleasant. Glancing up, I saw a tall, stately old man, bareheaded, smiling in amity.

"Zarf! Koto! *Up!*" I shouted, leaping to my feet, sword in hand. The old man raised his hand in protest.

"Nay, King Karan, they will sleep unless *I* release them from their slumber. That she-fiend put them into a trance from which only someone with power greater than hers can arouse them. Nor will I do so until after you and I confer on a matter of mutual benefit."

"Who are you?" I demanded. "And what devilment do you plan against me and my comrades?"

"Yon sleeper—Zarf—told you of a magician; and you set forth to seek that one, did you not? Well, I am he whom you seek, and your journey is at an end, King Karan. Knowing of your coming, I was prepared to greet you as soon as you entered my domains—and this ruined city marks my borderline. So, I am here!

"King Karan, you are naught to me, nor I to you. But we have a common enemy—Djl Grm! Between him and me there lies an ancient feud. You he has wronged. There is a service—I get that from your mind—which you hope I can and will render you.

"Karan, King afar from your crown, throne, and kingdom, you are a bold and resourceful man, and your two companions are worth an army of ordinary folk. Render me one service, faithfully, without evasion or quibble, and I will release your locked memory! Well?"

"Arouse Zarf and Koto," I commanded. "If you be the one I seek, they will identify you, nor will they harm you. I, Karan, give you protection!"

He actually laughed at that, although there was more of admiration than derision in his laugh.

"Bold as ever, King Karan," he complimented. "As you have said, so will I do." He made a slight gesture, murmuring something I could not catch. "Now, speak, in a whisper if you will, and see if they be asleep."

As I complied, they came abruptly to their feet, fully alert . . . they took one look . . . on Koto's ugly face came such an expression of ghastly fear that I hastened to assure him he was in no danger. Zarf bowed in respect, albeit he showed no fear. Our visitor spoke, in a courteous manner:

"You know me, Zarf? You, too, Baron Koto?"

"You are Agnor Halit, the mighty magician I persuaded my King to seek," Zarf responded gravely.

Koto nodded vehemently. "My father

says you have more power than the devil himself, O Agnor Halit."

"Is King Karan satisfied?"

"I am," I confirmed. "But why do you meet me here, rather than making me journey all the way to your abode?"

"For this reason—the service I ask, if I am to release your inhibited memory, will take you back on your path, even to the near shore of the Sea of the Dead. And so, I save you many long, weary days of travel, hardship, and danger."

"And this service?"

"Give heed, then, and I will explain. There is a treasure I would fain possess. There be good reasons why I may not go after it myself, yet those reasons would not affect you. Truth to tell, it is hidden in the territory ruled by another magician who knows not it is there. The one who hid this treasure is another magician . . . long ago he hid the priceless thing for some dire reason of his own. It is the statue of a naked, beautiful female; yet it is an enormous jewel —a flawless sapphire, a trifle over half life-size——"

"No sapphire in all the worlds was ever that big," I objected. But Agnor Halit merely smiled as he assented:

"True! But magic works wonders, King Karan. Your throne is made of a huge chrysolite, albeit not in all the worlds was a chrysolite ever that big! Still are you 'King Karan of the Chrysolite Throne.' Magic made your throne from certain substances, yet a trader in gems would tell you it is genuine chrysolite! . . .

"This sapphire statue was made from flesh and blood by enchantment. It is the actual body of a witch who dared withstand a great magician, long ago, until he conquered her by treachery. For punishment he transmuted her to sapphire, reducing her size to that of a half-grown child, and so left her a beautiful image in which her soul is still prisoned. But once I have that image in my possession, I will have a hold upon him. . . .

"He hated her so greatly that after turning her to crystal, he could in nowise abide to look upon her constantly; wherefore he hid her in a submerged cavern near this shore of the Sea of the Dead. But that cavern can be entered—at times."

"And if I bring to you this statue——"

"Then will I release the bonds that hold your memory in abeyance. So be it that you release the Sapphire Image to me, without any reservation or quibble—your memories of all the past will be perfect. I, Agnor Halit, magician, do pledge you this, Karan of Octolan. And my pledges I do keep to the last atom. I have wrought every known sin, and many nameless evils—but of one thing is Agnor Halit thus far guiltless—a broken promise!"

"It is well," I answered. And not to be outdone by him, a dealer in all unholiness, I gave pledge in return: "I, Karan, will deliver to you that treasure if I succeed in carrying out my venture, nor will I claim part or parcel in it. For aught I care, you may shatter it to blue slivers the moment I deliver it to you."

A demoniacal light flickered momentarily in that dark sorcerer's eyes as he said vindictively:

"I may do an even stranger thing than that, once the thing is in my possession!"

"I am not concerned with your mysteries," I shrugged. "All I need to know about you is that you and I have an agreement which we both intend to keep. Now, tell me all you can, that I may surely find that place where the Sapphire Image is hidden."

So for the rest of the night we three sat listening while that gentle-seeming old

man told us in detail all he knew about our course—while at the same time he warned us frankly that we were going direct into the worst antechamber of Hell when we reached the entrance to the cavern. And, as we later found out for ourselves, he understated. . . .

"LORD KARAN," Koto said, pointing—"unless Agnor Halit lied, yon place is the entrance to the cavern we seek."

We dismounted after one glance, for the marks were unmistakable. Five huge boulders indicated the angles of a pentagon; in the center, a pool, evidently filled with water from the Sea of the Dead through some underground channel. To substantiate this supposition, the surface of the pool heaved with the heaving of the surges along the beach some few hundred yards distant.

Even as we watched, the surface became violently agitated; a vortex formed, became a miniature whirlpool, making queer sucking noises, strange gurglings and whistling moans. This lasted for upward of an hour. After that, the surface became level and still.

Then abruptly came a change. In the very center a huge bubble rose and burst, polluting the atmosphere with a most unholy stench. More bubbles rose and the stench grew worse. Bubbles came continually, and the pool boiled like a cauldron, filling the air with horrible odor. Then again the surface stilled.

Now my courage well-nigh forsook me, and without shame I admit it. For I knew I'd have to dive into that loathly pool while the vortex pulled downward; and come up—if ever I did come up—while the bubbles arose! And it was in nowise a pleasing prospect. After we'd been studying the pool for some time, Zarf evidently came to the same conclusion I had reached, for he said bluntly:

"My King, that old devil, Agnor Halit, laid a trap for you! It is well known that King Karan does not lightly break his word. But if I, Zarf, have aught to say about this matter, here is once Karan of Octolan breaks a pledge, nor gives it a second thought. To plunge into that pool is the act of a madman. If that damned sorcerer wants that image so badly, let him come and dive for it himself. He will only go to Hell a little sooner, through a most befitting gateway, and this region of space will be that much improved because of his absence!"

"But my memory, Zarf?"

"Once you've gone into that filthy hole, you'll have no need for it, as you'll not come up to use it! Nay, let us rather go back to Koto's hut and plot to regain your kingdom. If successful, we can then force Djl Grm to undo his foul sorcery——"

"Not so fast, Zarf," Koto interrupted. "My father warned our King to comply with Agnor Halit's request, and said that if he did, all would go well with his plans. But my father said, too, that if our King refused, he'd regret it all his life long."

Now Zarf and I looked at each other blankly, for there was truth in what Koto had just said.

"I wonder if there is any other way to regain that statue," I suggested tentatively.

"I know a good way," Koto said simply. "It is just this: Koto goes down, and comes up with the image, or stays down there with it. And if aught goes wrong, Koto can well be spared——"

"Nay, my Koto," I said huskily, for I was deeply moved by the faithful fellow's loyal and courageous proffer—"I can ill spare——"

A gurgling noise from the pool. Koto rose abruptly, said no word and gave no

sign, but dived like a frog, head first, into the center of the rapidly forming whirlpool. Neither Zarf nor I had been alert enough to prevent him, for he had moved too quickly. We stared at each other, open-mouthed in amazement.

"King Karan," Zarf's voice rang like a clarion—"when you regain your kingdom remember that brave fool, Baron Koto of the Red Wilderness, and sometimes think of—Zarf!"

Splash!

I STOOD alone, gaping stupidly at the spot where two splendid, loyal noblemen had disappeared. The vortex was growing weaker—it would cease ere long —then an eternity of waiting, hoping—perhaps they would never come up—I'd be alone — never see them again—I, a King minus crown, throne, realm, memory, wife, subjects—why! the only *subjects* I knew or cared about. . . .

I took a deep full breath, and dived.

That vile fluid that stank so abominably hurt worse than it smelt. It was actually corrosive. It *bit!* Raw potash lye is its nearest comparison. . . . I was still head down and going deeper. I was spinning with the swirling until I grew dizzy. My eyeballs felt as if burning out of their sockets from that acrid solution —down, down, and down! A faint, dimly seen blue light struck horizontally through the whirlpool—two vague, shadowy figures barely seen as I whirled in that mad headlong dance—a powerful grip clamped fast on one of my ankles and I thought I was being rent apart—the vortex hated to let go—but that mighty pull at my leg would not be denied—I looked up into Koto's ugly face—then Zarf's voice, heavy with reproach:

"King Karan, is this well? Go back, I pray you, as soon as the bubbles rise!"

But at that, I flatly refused, standing on my royal dignity; and I made them yield the point, maugre their stubborn insistence.

A tunnel stretched away into the dim distance, and up that tunnel we started—toward what? Steadily the blue light became stronger, and in my mind arose the certitude that it emanated from the Blue Image. Demon faces peered at us from cracks and crevices, but none of the devils of the place found hardihood to attack us.

The tunnel debouched into a great cavern. In the exact center, on a mound of bleached skulls stood the source of the blue radiance—the Sapphire Witch herself. I gasped in awed admiration at the flawless perfection of her beauty — and suddenly, how I did hate that sorcerer Agnor Halit, to whom I'd promised to deliver that exquisite Image of Incomparable Loveliness! Cheerfully would I have bartered the empires of the universe for its possession—did I but own those empires — nor would I have considered the price exorbitant. *I* wanted it—*I wanted it!* And I'd pledged——

Around that mound, in a ring on the floor of the cavern, lay many stones. Half the size of human heads they were, round as balls, and no two were of the same color. Every one was aglow, softly, with inward lights, as if each were afire deep inside—dark reds there were; dull orange; dusky blues, garish greens and sinister purples. We knew they were sentient, malignant, resenting our intrusion! Koto responded by kicking one stone that was apparently sneering at him and radiating contempt. At the impact of Koto's foot, the smoldering stone gave forth a metallic clang like a smitten gong, rose straight in the air to the level of Koto's face—then hurtled straight at him with a speed that would have cracked his skull, had not Zarf struck at the Flying Stone with his sword and deflected its course.

A dozen of them promptly left the floor and flew at Zarf—who as promptly turned and fled. But he was actuated by discretion rather than fear. I saw him race headlong into a crack in the tunnel wall—and shortly, the devil who dwelt therein came tumbling out, well-nigh sheared in two by Zarf's sword. Evidently Zarf preferred coping with devils, to the Flying Stones. Koto, having the same idea, hastily retreated to the tunnel mouth — and I went with Koto. In another moment Zarf rejoined us there, grinning sheepishly. The Flying Stones did not follow us that far from the Blue Statue. . . .

We stood disconsolate, wondering how we were to pass their formidable menace —and as if to show us how futile was our quest, of a sudden the entire ring of Flying Stones levitated to the height of a man's shoulders and head, and commenced to swirl about the Sapphire Witch who stood so serene on her altar of skulls. Truly a strange goddess, and guarded by even stranger acolytes!

Fast and faster swirled the Flying Stones, their colored lights glowing more and more brightly—faster yet, until we could no longer distinguish any single stone — they were merely a beautiful, gleaming blur of fire—gradually a humming sound became audible, swelling in volume till it became a roar like the diapason of a mighty organ—soon it became distinguishable as a chant of warning! . . .

And at that, a sort of madness came upon me. I had come for that image —to bear it away—not to stand and look at it from a distance. And that image I meant to take, forthwith! In my rage, all else faded—kingdom, wife, subjects, memory, Agnor Halit, Djl Grm, Zarf, Koto, even my own welfare mattered not. I ran forward, shouting:

"Fools! I am Karan of Octolan! I have come for that image! It shall be mine! Down and lie still, I say!"

Now who was I, after all, that those Flying Stones should obey me? Yet so it was! The fiery band settled down instantly. I walked confidently forward, picked up the image, and so, back to where Zarf and Koto stood staring in amazed incredulity.

"Somewhat of magic my King knows, it appears!" gasped Koto shakily. I myself could hardly believe it. But the fact remained that I held the statue in my arms. And we three walked down that tunnel, nor did aught bother us all the way to the upper world!

ONCE at the surface, we wiped the foulness of the pool from the lovely image, and stood actually adoring the matchless treasure in the clear light . . . looked suddenly up, and saw Koto's father, and with him that utterly damned sorcerer, Djl Grm.

The sorcerer clutched swiftly for the image, but as swiftly Zarf spun his sword in a glittering wheel of defense in front of it—and the magician flinched back. Then he pointed a finger—and Zarf became temporarily paralyzed. Koto snatched up the image, and tucking it beneath his left arm, he waggled his formidable bludgeon under the sorcerer's nose with a meaning gesture.

"Try that trick on me!" he invited grimly. But the magician, for some reason, declined Koto's urgent invitation. Instead, I became aware of rapid interchange of telepathic speech between Koto's father and Djl Grm. The great Elemental turned to Koto.

"Are you my son?"

"That, you should know best," Koto responded with a grim smile. He seemed to know what was coming next.

"Then," his father commanded—"give the Blue Image to its proper owner!"

"No!" and Koto shook his head defiantly. "It is not seemly that my King should carry burdens while I, his follower, go empty-handed. I carry it for him. His it is by right of power—for he made the Flying Stones yield to him their trust, and he bore it away from the Altar of Skulls, unmolested!"

The Elemental grew black with rage. His eyes flamed crimson, and their awful glare frightened Zarf and me. Koto looked perturbed, but a faint reddish spark began flickering in his eyes, too.

"Give that Image to Djl Grm, I said!" The Elemental's voice held a note of awful finality.

Koto's arm flew back and swept forward again, and his bludgeon smashed full in his father's face.

"My father you are," Koto howled in fury—"but Karan is my King!"

Unharmed by the impact, the Elemental gravely handed Koto his great club. But it was to me he spoke:

"King Karan, I said I might yet be proud of Koto—*I am!*" Then to the sorcerer, sternly:

"Djl Grm, I know your power—and I know its limitations. And I know, likewise, what you have in mind. Summon your legions if you dare and I will summon mine. And what that will mean to us both ere all be ended, you know, as do I! To a certain extent, I aided you in this affair, for I wished to see how big my son had grown in the service of his King—and I am proud of his loyalty. So long as my son shall cleave to him, Karan of Octolan is my ally and friend. *Djl Grm, is it peace—or war?"*

The magician seemed like to explode with impotent fury. Suddenly he vanished with a scream of baffled, venomous rage. Then came a terrific sensation, comparable only to the emotion an arrow must feel as it leaves the string of a powerful bow.

Koto, still holding the Sapphire Image under his left arm and his great club clenched in his right fist—Zarf and I, still holding our drawn swords—and Koto's father, smiling as if pleased that he had broken openly with Djl Grm—stood looking at each other, hardly knowing what to say. But one thing we three realized—Koto's father had once again displayed his control of the forces of Nature, and we were in the city of ghosts, where I had promised to meet Agnor Halit. The Elemental said something to Koto that made him grin from ear to ear; then it vanished.

NIGHT. And we three sat by a brightly burning campfire. Not one of us cared to sleep. We were taking no chances on some unexpected treachery assailing us at the last moment. Again and again I had tried to reach Agnor Halit mentally, bidding him come get his Blue Image and give me my price, that I might be done with a distasteful business; because *I* wanted that statue for myself, and also because I liked old Agnor Halit not one whit better than his fellow sorcerer, Djl Grm. And the sooner I was quit of further doings with either or both of those two, the more pleased I'd be. . . . But Agnor Halit came not. A hope dawned in my mind—perhaps he had met with some disaster. Then Koto caught my mind and spoiled that idea.

"Nay! He lives. He will come whenever it pleases him to come—till then—we—can—but—wait."

Koto sagged where he sat, slumped over on his side—and snored! Zarf, a second later, did likewise. Amazed, I shouted at them. As well shout at two solid rocks! I grew afraid at that, for I saw what was toward—they, of their own

free wills, would never have acted thus! Some malign power had wrought a sleep-spell on them, and I was left to face whatever might happen.

And it started immediately!

The ruined city was materializing as it was before calamity fell upon it! Stone upon stone, tier upon tier, story upon story, tower and turret and pylon, pinnacle, spire and dome, it grew in might and beauty, albeit the might suggested cruelty and the beauty was wholly evil.

The streets filled with people—men, women, and little children; and on no face did I see aught written of good, but only all wickedness. Before I could decide what to do, of a sudden a detachment of soldiery bore down on me, surrounding me before I could rise to my feet. Again I shouted to Zarf and Koto; and deep as was the slumber-spell, Koto's brain must have caught, in part, my warning. For he moved uneasily, flinging out one arm restlessly. That arm fell across the image where it lay wrapped in my cloak.

Roughly I was yanked to my feet. The soldiers disregarded the two others, for some reason. Through the streets they led me, into a splendid edifice that proved to be a temple of the loathly devil-gods I had seen depicted on the various rock-faces among the ruins.

Seated on a resplendent throne was the seductively lovely Princess of Hell, looking more alluring than when first I saw her. Languidly smiling, she addressed me as if naught but utmost amity had marked our former brief acquaintance.

"All this I have wrought for your sake, O Stranger for whom I yearn. I did it that you might have proof it is no weakling wraith who seeks your love, but one truly great, powerful, and—if you will have it so—kindly disposed toward you."

"What do you really want of me?" I demanded bluntly. "I'm not a total fool, to believe you're actually in love with me, a mere mortal nobody!"

"A mere mortal nobody?" The Princess smiled, highly amused. "Karan of Octolan, Lord of the Chrysolite Throne, is hardly a mere mortal nobody. You do yourself injustice, for you are very much a man. And not a maid in all my train but would be happy to be your mate—and myself most of all.

"Secretly, you regard me as a fiend. Well, I *am!* But I want you to know me fully. Between such as I, and your sort, exists an almost impassable barrier—unless one of your sort invites one of my order across the border. You have a different magnetism, highly beneficial to us, and we delight to bathe therein, returning in exchange a portion of our own powerful vibrations. Thus impregnated, new powers and capacities are yours for the wielding.

"We 'fiends' do not seek your souls! Most of your souls are not worth having, so weak, so embryonic are they. Not good enough to attain to celestial realms, nor wicked enough to be welcome in Hell, naught remains for most of your race but return, life after life, to some of the material planes. But within you, Karan, are great capacities for absolute Evil or absolute Good. Aye, a fit mate for even me——"

"You've said enough," I interrupted harshly. "Mate with *you?* Give you of my magnetic radiations—draw from *you* strength, power, and capacities? Why, you she-devil, sooner would I spend eternity adoring hopelessly——"

"That Blue Witch you stole," she hissed venomously. "O Fool ten thousand times accursed! You dare compare me to that icy cold crystal that can not move? I would have crowned you Lord of Hell itself in a century's time, had you

accepted my offer; but since you dare to refuse me—you shall pay! . . ."

And pay I did!

IN OBEDIENCE to some unspoken command from the infuriated she-fiend, a particularly malignant-appearing priest stepped forward from amidst a group of his kind. I had never before seen a face so utterly unhuman. His body was more ape-like than man-like.

The priest laid one prehensile paw on my shoulder—and received a smashing blow full in the face from my fist. The priest did not even change expression, but my fist felt as if I had hit a solid rock. Holding me at arm's length, he jabbed me lightly with one finger. He knew anatomy and neurology, that devil-priest, for that light touch wrung a gasp of agony from me, and brought the cold sweat from every pore of my body, while it sent a terrific thrill like commingled ice and fire along every fiber of my nervous system.

That was merely a preliminary. . . .

A vise-like grip on my temples with thumb and finger—what sort of uncanny powers did that devil-priest control? And throb after throb of lance-like twinges tore through my brain, each one a solid impact, each impact worse than the preceding one; until at each twinge bright sparks burst within my skull, rending and searing the tissues of my brain, and I, all fortitude lost, howled, moaned, shrieked and yelled like any madman in Bedlam as those awful pulsations continued into an eternity of anguish.

But that became monotonous. My howls were too much alike, and wearied the Princess. The devil-priest tried a new one. Releasing my temples, he lightly slapped me on the chest with the flat of his hand, meantime blowing his breath on my forehead. . . .

A most delightful sense of surcease from torture after anguish unbearable swept all through me, and I sighed my relief; but that devil-priest ran his thumb along my spine, once, and the terrific agony of that caress made all I had suffered previously seem but exquisite delight!

Stepping back a pace, the devil-priest levelled his arm, his stiffly extended fingers pointing straight at me, and I commenced to gyrate, at first slowly, then with ever accelerating speed; fast and faster, and faster yet, until the surroundings became a blur—and faster still, until the surroundings and the blur, too, disappeared, and naught remained but myself aspin on my own axis!

Crash!

The motion was instantaneously reversed, and what ghastly effect that simple action had upon me can never be imagined or described. It had to be undergone to be understood, and what little sense I'd still managed to retain thus far left me entirely. . . .

I awoke! I was stretched out on a couch, suffused with untellable fatigue, acutely conscious of agonies endured beyond all endurance. . . .

"O my beloved! Such sufferings! But never again! In my arms, O loved man, shall you regain strength and know bliss beyond all thinking."

Hovering over me, holding me in her arms, shielding and protecting me from further harm, was a superbly beautiful woman. Azure was her hair, blue as the midsummer skies was her shimmering skin that shone with a clear luster surpassing any gem; yet in nowise was she a stone statue, but a living, breathing, loving, tender, soft-bodied woman of flesh and blood! I reached up feeble arms about her neck, drawing her down to me—almost had her lips touched mine—a lambent reddish light flickered mo-

mentarily in her wondrous blue eyes——

"You infernal hag!"

It was but a putrid corpse I held so lovingly within the circle of my arms—and in it the worms and maggots were acrawl! . . .

The Princess of Hell, on her gorgeous throne, gave utterance to a trill of merry laughter at the success of that final glamorous torment of the man who had dared refuse her proffered love. . . .

THAT laugh changed to a shriek of fury ere the last silvery note of her mirth died out! Facing her where she sat surrounded by her guards and courtiers, stood a tall, robed figure, grimly eyeing her in a silence more fraught with menace than any words could have conveyed.

"Agnor Halit!" she screamed in a paroxysm of terror, as she recognized the mighty sorcerer.

"Even so, O Princess of Hell, Queen over a ghostly race and a ghost city that I shattered with my magic, ages agone. And now! For that you have not felt the weight of my hand in the last few centuries, you have grown overbold. You actually dared molest this man, knowing that he was at the time engaged in serving my purpose!"

Agnor Halit drew from the breast of his robe a most peculiar reptile, more like a short, extremely thick centipede than aught else. He held it up between thumb and finger. His words came slow, heavy, laden with doom:

"Into this vileness shalt thou go, nor ever come forth from it until I, Agnor Halit, am no more!"

He flung the small abhorrence on the dais, before the feet of the Princess. It remained there, immovable, its full eyes fixed on her face; and she stared back in awe-stricken, horrified fascination.

The sorcerer stretched out his arms, his quivering fingers aimed at the beauteous, erotic fiend trembling in an ecstasy of fear there on her sumptuous seat. Over guards and courtiers, priests and populace an icy terror fell; they stood staring with incredulous eyes, immovable — I myself could scarce breathe from the suspense of that tense waiting. . . .

The Princess of Hell began to shrink. Small and smaller she became, dwindling visibly before our eyes—she became as tiny as the reptile—every exquisite feature of her loveliness remained intact, in miniature—a gray mist swirled between reptile and Princess—*they became one!*

Agnor Halit snapped finger and thumb, deliberately, insultingly contemptuous. At the *"Tshuk"* he made, the entire scene vanished!

I rubbed my eyes . . . I could not believe . . . a tiny reptile, most resembling a centipede, ran before my foot and around the corner of a boulder . . . but facing me was the sorcerer I sought. . . .

"King Karan, you had a narrow escape," he assured me, earnestly. "But she is harmless now. Not even her devil-friends can enable her to work further mischief. She will be naught but a venomous worm so long as I shall continue to live—and as I may perish only by one method which none knows save me, she is like to endure for ages! Her bite might prove dangerous, but the fear I inspired in her will prevent her from trying that, even."

While talking, we had drawn to where lay Zarf and Koto. At our arrival they sat up as if waking from a natural nap. Zarf stared at the magician with undisguised hostility. Koto, most surprizingly, gave the magician a wide grin of welcome; more, he threw back my cloak and permitted Agnor Halit to see that we actually had the image he so desired. But Koto kept nigh, with a wary eye on

the sorcerer's every move. Agnor Halit's eyes gleamed with a baleful light, his voice held a note of repressed, unholy exultation:

"King Karan, I am ready to fulfil my part of our pact. Once again, are you willing to renounce all claim to this Sapphire Image, yielding it to me to do with as may please my whim?"

"I am," I replied briefly. "Take the thing and give my price to me—the release of my memory. I grow weary of this magic and mystery-mongering, and would be about my own proper affairs."

"Not so fast," grinned Koto as the sorcerer turned eagerly to the statue. "King Karan has shown you his part of the bargain. Touch this image, ere you fulfil your part—which is not visible, but must be made evident to King Karan's satisfaction—and you have the father of Koto to reckon with—and, Agnor Halit, his power is greater than yours. If you doubt that—try conclusions with him! Shall I, his son, summon him?"

"King Karan," and Agnor Halit ignored Koto completely—"your word is inviolable, nor do I break promises. Yet Baron Koto is right. I can see your part—and you shall receive mine ere I take my payment. Is that satisfactory?"

"Magician," I exclaimed, impatient, "do more, and talk less! And you, Koto, let him have the thing as suits him best. I have taken his word, even as he accepts mine. Shall we quibble endlessly?"

"Yet will I do even as Baron Koto wishes," the sorcerer smiled. He laid his left hand on the back of my neck. The forefinger of his other hand he pressed tightly against my forehead just between the eyebrows.

A slight tingling flowed from that fingertip, through my brain, to the center of the palm against my neck. A tiny spark like a distant star lit in the center of my brain. It grew and grew, filling my entire skull with a silvery-golden brilliance shot through with coruscations and sparkling, scintillant flashes. . . .

CRASH!

Insofar as I was aware of anything, my head had just exploded! . . . All the agonies I had ever experienced were as naught compared to that! I was so absolutely stunned I could not even fall down and die! Across immeasurable voids came a trumpet-like voice:

"King Karan, I have kept my promise!"

I BLINKED, and my dazed mind cleared. *Gods and Devils!* . . . In one terrific rush, I knew all! Not one trifling detail of all the long reign in Octolan as Karan of the Chrysolite Throne was lacking in my memory! And thereupon my soul descended into Hell even as I stood facing that damnable sorcerer who openly sneered in my very face, gloating over my mental anguish—for I knew one thing which wrecked all benefits I had hoped to gain by my memory's restoration. . . .

That Sapphire Image was the actual body of my wife and Queen, Mehul-Ira, transmuted by the hellish magic of that rebel sorcerer, Djl Grm, into a flawless jewel, with her pure soul imprisoned within the depths of the wondrous blue crystal—and *I* had renounced all claim to the image, thereby giving my royal spouse to another sorcerer quite as evil as the one I'd rescued her from! . . .

"Karan, becozened and bejaped King, I claim my price!"

"Take it—you—devil!" I managed to gasp finally, albeit my soul was dying within me, and my anguish was plainly visible to my followers. . . .

"Take the image, magician," Koto grinned.

Almost was I tempted to slay Koto for grinning like that when my very soul was suffering all the agonies of dissolution without the comfort of death's release.

Agnor Halit moved not from where he stood. Only he pointed his finger at the image. A pink mist enshrouded the statue, turned to a deep rose-red, then to scarlet, and finally became crimson like rich blood. Gradually it faded, and a living, breathing woman, radiantly lovely, arose from where she lay on the hard ground, stood erect, turned, smiling at me with an unmistakable light in her great softly shining eyes—she stretched out longing arms—Koto flung my cloak about her, concealing her exquisite perfection from the avid gaze of the sorcerer—she spoke, and the music of her voice tore my heart with its sweetness:

"Karan! *My* Karan! After all these dreary years! I am still all yours. . . ."

"Nay!" Agnor Halit interrupted harshly. "Karan has renounced all his claim to you! You are *mine!*"

That devilish magician, inspired by the malice common to all his ilk, had perpetrated upon me a treachery so utterly fiendish that even the demons in Hell must have shrieked and rocked in glee upon their white-hot brazen seats!

He opened his mouth to its fullest extent, and peals of gargantuan laughter bellowed forth. In a daze, I noted dimly that Koto had stooped and now held something in his hand—why! it looked like a short thick worm—or a centipede. . . .

"Agnor Halit!" Koto spoke with a sneer more bitter than aught the sorcerer knew how to use—"King Karan gave you the image, to do with as pleased your whim—but he gave not his wife! Upon her you have no claim! But I, Koto of the Red Wilderness, in her place give you —*this!*"

Flung with unerring accuracy, the tiny reptile, writhing and twisting, shot from Koto's hand, disappearing in the yawning cavity of the sorcerer's mouth.

Agnor Halit closed his mouth with a gulp of surprize. He staggered—his face turned to a ghastly greenish hue—the body that had so long defied the ravages of death dashed itself to the ground, rolling in hideous torture—convulsion after convulsion shook it—then slowly ceased—and a second later we were gazing, incredulous, at a carrion corpse that stank most outrageously and in which the worms and maggots were already at work.

"Somewhat of magic Koto knows," Koto grinned. "While my body lay still, my spirit went with my King and saw all; then, returning, I dreamed the secret Agnor Halit deemed that none knew save himself! The Princess of Hell crawled into my hand that I might use her, and so, she revenged herself! Agnor Halit is now in Hell, where she can deal with him according to her fancy!"

WE MOUNTED our great birds. My Queen sat before me, my arm steadying her. Before us, smiling pleasantly, was Koto's father. Koto grinned at him.

"Am I your son?"

"I myself could have wrought no better," responded the great Elemental, generously.

"Your son is sorry his father has lost his once mighty power." Koto's tone was lugubrious in the extreme.

"Lost my power?"

"Aye! My King would rest tonight within my castle on the far edge of the Red Wilderness, my Barony—yet here we sit on these ugly, slow birds. . . ."

Again the fury of the elements were loosed for my benefit. . . . We slept that night at Koto's castle!

The Virus of Hell

By WILLIAM H. POPE

"His hand lifted, and a thin sheet of flame leaped from the pistol."

A grim, prophetic story of fifty years hence, when Organized Crime rules the United States, and a ghastly dew falls from the sky

"ISN'T it about time for—for it to begin?"

The words fell hollowly on the air of the sealed chamber, like words dropped in the stagnant silence of a vault. My body jerked spasmodically and I shot a startled look toward the other four men entombed with me in this lead-walled room a score of feet underground.

Enloe and Ward had reacted to the sudden stimulus as I had done; they were glaring resentfully at Fenwick, who had spoken. But Boothe was watching me as though he had not heard the doom-laden warning, his cold, tawny eyes appraising me sardonically. I flushed under his scrutiny and he turned away, a wraith of a smile on his thin lips.

I did not like Boothe, nor he me; some day there would be an accounting, but

this year of 1985, with the last pitiful remnant of Right suspended above a seething maelstrom of Evil, was no time for personal differences. I could not forget that in an adjoining chamber, lead-sheathed like this to guard against espionage by our enemies' vision-rays, a white-haired, devoted scientist was laboring day and night to release us from our crushing bondage, even eating and sleeping in his hastily equipped laboratory to save precious minutes and avoid the possibility of fatal discovery. So I swallowed my anger and watched Boothe as he rose with the springy grace of a great cat and crossed the room to a panel of translucent quartz. With his heavy hand on an inset switch he turned to us, his insolently accusing eyes fleeting over me as he spoke:

"Fenwick recalled us from morbid anticipation. Behold the latest victim!"

And he closed the switch, again letting his glance flit toward me with a trace of suggestiveness in it.

The blood started again to my face, to recede swiftly as the panel glowed with light, and leave my skin cold with the realization of this daily horror to which we could not grow accustomed. We leaned forward, nerves taut as violin strings, faces drawn with horror and impotent grief.

At first the panel pictured only a swirling confusion of shadows, incomplete and shifting rapidly. Boothe guided a tiny indicator on the illuminated globe beside the panel, and the scene blurred, then sprang into startling clearness when the needle stopped on one of the numbered squares. Through this televistic window we looked into the Public Square of Colony 4, situated more than five hundred miles from where we sat here in Colony 6 on the south Atlantic seaboard. So great was the magic of the reproducing electrical waves which picked up the light vibrations and etched them on the six-foot square panel, that we could see the set features, the grim attitude of ghastly expectancy graven on the faces of the multitude which milled restlessly in the open square. But this was not the scene for which our nerves clamored. Boothe adjusted the indicator a minute fraction, and a gasp escaped from our dry throats.

The new view showed a raised platform in the middle of the Square, a huge cube of concrete above which a black, fan-shaped thing of metal was suspended between four slender columns of steel set in the concrete. The eyes of the waiting throng were glued to this platform with the terrible fascination which compels one to keep his gaze on the gibbet during an execution. And execution this was to be; even as we watched, a figure mounted the platform steps with a defiant stride and faced the multitude with proudly uplifted head.

"Whitmore!" croaked Ward. "Gad, what nerve!"

"And there comes Black George, damn him!" rasped Enloe.

A tall, slouching man in a brown uniform was following Whitmore up the wide steps. He was not a negro, but his skin was so swarthy as to have earned him the sobriquet of "Black" George. He was the official executioner of the International Council, and he smiled cruelly as he looked over the sea of hate-filled faces and jerked his thumb insinuatingly at the fan-shaped thing above. Whitmore's lips began to move; he was addressing the crowd, confirmed orator that he was, and Boothe swiftly closed another switch on the other side of the panel. Instantly the words became clearly audible:

"——neither myself nor any other of that determined band will let fall a hint of their whereabouts. Together they are the Damocletian sword held over the

heads of our cursed criminal masters by the thread of their labors, and when those labors are complete the sword will fall with crushing vengeance. Stand fast, friends. Die, if need be, as I shall die. But do nothing to jeopardize the safety of the two who will soon free you from the fetters of Organized Crime. The day of reckon——"

The brave speech was never completed. The International Council was not of a mind to allow such an inflammatory message to be broadcast. A half-dozen uniformed guards leaped to the platform under direction of the officer in charge. Swiftly they seized Whitmore, binding his hands and feet and forcibly bending his head, securing it in place with a metal band at the end of a spring. Black George raised his arm up one of the columns and from the slitted, fan-shaped muzzle of the machine came a sheet of crimson flame, thin as a knife-blade and infinitely swifter. Whitmore's head was sheared cleanly from its neck, quivering at the end of the spring, while the body stood erect for a moment, then slumped in a heap on the platform.

Black George leered mockingly at the spectators.

A deep murmur welled up from the multitude, a murmur that swelled into a booming roar. A wave of infuriated humanity surged toward the execution platform, but Black George and the guards quickly demounted the flame-projector and wheeled its menacing muzzle in a slow arc about them. The wave stopped before that deadly threat, and brown uniforms, brandishing flame-pistols, began to work through the milling mob, cutting out the leaders and hurrying them away. The riot was over.

BOOTHE opened the switches. "Enough for today, gentlemen." We understood his slight emphasis upon "today." Tomorrow, at this hour, the tragic scene would be repeated in a different Colony with a fresh victim, as it had been repeated now for ten days. As there were only ten Colonies, this was Number 4's second sacrifice, though the Council didn't always take them in exact rotation. Tomorrow it might be our turn again or one of the others'. We never knew until a short bit before the execution hour, the uncertainty being a part of the Council's punishment for our stubbornness.

Hence I knew the meaning of the glances cast at me by the sardonic Boothe; knew with sickening certainty what was in the minds of the men in that room, in the minds of all the oppressed colonists.

I was the one Whitmore and all these devoted people were shielding with their lives—I, and one other, Nathan Woodruff, the white-haired scientist, who was at this very moment absorbed with his chemical formulae in the adjoining room, striving with might and brain to evolve that which would lift the curse from the harassed Colonies. We two were the ones mentioned by Whitmore in his last speech, the ones desired above all things by the International Council, and we could at any time stop the fearful slaughter which was decreed irrevocably for each and every day until we should be surrendered.

The thought was horrible. For ten days and nights I had suffered with the knowledge that a life was being given for mine with every rotation of the earth. I couldn't sleep without starting up from a grisly dream; even my waking hours were haunted by the look of agony on the faces of the victims of that hellish flame.

Victims of loyalty!

I got up from my chair, shaky but grimly determined. Boothe was watching me quizzically, but I gave him no heed.

"Men," I said steadily, "Whitmore was

like a father to me, and I feel a little groggy. I've got to have some fresh air——"

Enloe stepped in my path. "We all feel that way, son, but we would feel far worse if we permitted you to carry out what's in your mind. Sit down, Draughon."

He had read my design on my face, I suppose, but I was desperate. "I will not," I told him stubbornly. "Sit here and watch man after man give his life that I may live? God forbid that I should forget the principles for which we live! Let me out. I'm going to stop this butchery."

It was not bravado; I meant what I said. Even death was preferable to those grisly nightmares. But he pushed me back to my chair.

"God forbid," he said sternly, "that you should so have misinterpreted the principles for which we live! The Colonial Constitution is founded on Truth, Honor, Justice, and I should violate at least two of the cardinal principles if I allowed you to give yourself up."

"It would gain a few days' respite, save a few lives," I argued. "In the meantime Professor Woodruff will finish his work. And I am no longer of benefit to the Cause."

"Without you, Draughon, today there would be no Cause to die for. Two weeks ago when you and Woodruff were thrown into the glass prison at Washington, condemned to die under the Flame for conspiring against the Council, the Colonies lost all hope. And then the greed of Joroon De Berrie gave you your chance and you accomplished the death of De Berrie, his lieutenant, Muir, and the scoundrelly traitor Dured Akridge. Then you effected the release of Woodruff from prison, the first escape from its grim gates in its history. That is why a man willingly dies each day to preserve your freedom; it is through you that they have been given new hope that the long reign of terror is doomed. If you surrender, Draughon, those men, including Whitmore, will have died in vain. Let's not render their sacrifice futile."

The others nodded their approval of Enloe's rebuking lecture. Seeing the matter in this new light made me feel better until Boothe heaved his bulk to the floor and spoke with maddening ambiguity.

"The Council's decree calling for a victim each day until you and the professor are delivered into their hands is merely revenge on their part, my dear quixotic fellow, and you could not add to your laurels by becoming a martyr."

He sat down, that fleeting, irritating smile on his lips. I was about to retort angrily, when the panel communicating with the laboratory slid back and the tall figure of Woodruff in a white chemist's robe stood framed in the opening. His eyes were alight with a glow of exultation, and a half-smile played about his lips.

"Gentlemen," he said with a quiet touch of pride, "the work is complete—and successfully so!"

A SIGH of relief escaped us. Fenwick sobbed emotionally. Mingled with my own gratification was a thrill of pride in my own small part in the triumph. Woodruff strode to the small table and placed on it a bottle filled with a milky fluid. Beside it he placed another of the same size containing a liquid slightly different in appearance. He stepped back and faced us.

"Those bottles of fluid, friends, are the result of years of theory and weeks of effort. Together they represent more potential force for good and evil than it

would be possible otherwise to concentrate in any given spot on the earth's surface. The one I have named simply the Serum of Right; the other, because of its malefic properties, I have called the Virus of Hell!"

We fidgeted uneasily in our chairs, memories of the great War of the Chemists of 1960 flooding into our minds. That murderously short conflict had shaken the world with horror. What new flood of destruction and agony had the professor developed in his crucibles and test-tubes?

Woodruff smiled reassuringly.

"There is no possibility of explosion, gentlemen; nor can the fluids generate a lethal gas. They are to be administered hypodermically."

I stared at him in astonishment. Ward, Fenwick, even Enloe, looked askance. Boothe grunted contemptuously.

"And is this what we have been waiting for—what men have been dying for each day—a mere sedative?" he asked raspingly. "And when the effects of the potion wear off—saying our enemies can be induced to take it—what then?"

Woodruff let his eyes play over Boothe for long, flaying seconds; eyes that were at once pitying and disdainful. Boothe's aplomb was shaken by that scornful scrutiny and he subsided, flushing darkly. The chemist gave his attention to the rest of us, ignoring Boothe.

"An explanation is in order, gentlemen, lest you join with Boothe in believing that I have wasted my time at the expense of more valuable lives, but you must be content with a simple outline; details are too technical. First, I will summarize our situation, designating the two continental factions present in the calculation simply as Good and Evil, which, in the last analysis, and with a few exceptions, they really are. You are perfectly familiar, of course, with the gradual breakdown of the public moral fiber which permitted Evil to gain open control of the government, which they had directed *sub rosa* for many years, and of the refusal of a small but high-principled minority to accept that condition, and of the shambles which followed their rebellion. But it was not Evil's intention to eradicate the rebels, for they numbered in their ranks the brainiest and most talented men of the era; it is significant that the men selected by nature to make each forward step of civilization are men of honor, integrity, and sympathy. No worth-while contribution to life can be made by one of low principles.

"Evil, selfishly shrewd, recognized this, and instead of eliminating the type they segregated Good into colonies so that they could profit by Good's progress and yet not be hampered by its conscience."

This was old to us; I saw the sneering face of Boothe open in a wide yawn. Woodruff also noticed and resumed:

"Perhaps I am boring you, but this preamble is necessary to your understanding why I concentrated my efforts on developing the fluid in these bottles instead of perfecting a new lethal gas, a deadly ray, or a destructive rearrangement of atomic forces. Men, I ask a very pointed question to support my contention: Is it feasible for the twenty-odd thousand Good to engage the quarter-billion Evil in a battle for supremacy?"

Enloe, always seeing good in the worst of us, asked:

"But isn't your classification too rigid? Surely there must be countless millions of folk on the continent who are not evil. They simply follow the path of least resistance."

"A good gas would wipe them out, lock, stock, and barrel," interjected Boothe savagely. "But a soporific—my God!"

The sarcasm was serenely ignored by the gray-haired chemist.

"That indeed would be the obvious remedy. But Enloe brought out the objection to it. Our creed is Truth, Honor, Justice. We would be false to every principle should we attempt to slaughter our persecutors. We had a horrible example of wholesale murder in the late war when whole cities died as a single man."

There was no gainsaying this fact. But what was his plan?

"Friends," and his voice was solemn, yet ringing with conviction, as of a man who has stumbled upon a great truth and is awed by its majestic grandeur. "Friends, to us has been given the power to usher in the Millennium." Almost reverently he picked up one of the bottles, which I now saw was marked with a small blue label; the other one was red. "A few drops of this liquid injected near the spinal bulb will transform the most vicious creature of the cesspools of Evil into the man his Creator intended him to be!"

In a twinkling it all came to me, and I gasped at the sheer audacity of the idea. Ward, Fenwick, Enloe stared at the chemist with a tinge of awe as the meaning of his words dawned upon them. Even Boothe was impressed, but he picked the weak point of the plan.

"Granted the fluid will do as you say," he said heavily. "You will have to convert your sinner before he will consent to being a saint. None will consent to the injection willingly, and if we have to kill them to make them like it, how resurrect them afterward?"

Sarcasm had become insolence. The scientist looked at him coldly.

"An injection would do you no harm!" he said bluntly. "There will be men brave enough to start the thing, I'm sure, and once the leaders of Evil are reached the rest will be easy. It grows in geometrical progression."

"How does it work?" this from Ward, who was a minor scientist.

"Through the autonomic nervous system. I won't tire you with a long technical exposition; it has taken me years of theorizing to work this matter out, and even then the basic idea was not original. Even back in the early 1900's scientists had a vague notion that major emotions were the result of physiological causations; part of their remarkable leniency toward proved criminals was prompted by a belief that the culprit was not wholly to blame for his crime, but was the victim of a diseased mind. In working on this theory I discovered a very minute bacillus which fed on certain of the nerve cells; a culture of this bacillus injected into animals makes them exceedingly vicious —two drops injected into a timid rabbit in thirty minutes will turn him into a ferocious carnivore, preferring mice and even his own offspring to his customary vegetable diet! My discovery of the bacilli was made possible by the atomoscope; they are not apparent under the most powerful microscope, and the finest porcelain filter passes them like open-mesh screening. This fluid, the Serum, is a perfect antitoxin; and with the nervous system free of the lurking devils, the subject's mind becomes as pure and innocent as that of a child."

"And the other bottle?" queried Boothe in a speculative tone.

"That is the virus. It was necessary to work the two out together."

Woodruff's face was grave as he picked up the red-labeled vial, and he spoke in a hushed voice like a man telling forbidden things.

"The Virus of Hell! Never was a substance better named. I hesitate to predict the result were a number of men in-

oculated with this fluid. Fiends from hell they would be in truth, with never a spark of mercy left for friend or foe; wanton cruelty would motivate their actions, and the strangling of helpless babes would be tame sport to their blood-lusting spirits!"

He shook the vial slightly and held it before our eyes in the glow from the light-cone in the ceiling.

"See! The bacilli of hell swirling hungrily in their culture, invisible but clouding the liquor as if the smoke-fumes of the pit itself were diffused in the bottle! But few of us are entirely free of this terrible microbe, men, much as it was with the tubercle bacilli a generation or so ago; but not even the lowest brute in the deepest dive is thoroughly inoculated. Knowing the cruelty of some of our oppressors, you may imagine what they would become with this."

HE REPLACED the vial on the table and regarded us seriously.

"It will be necessary to begin at the top—with Luigi Caldoni, say, and the rest of the Council. After that it should be simple."

Luigi Caldoni, supreme chief of the International Council! Caldoni's order it was which called for a death each day until we should be delivered to the Council. If the professor's serum could change that brute's nature it would be miraculous indeed.

"Shall we call for volunteers?" Woodruff's voice broke into my thoughts. I was rising when Boothe interrupted.

"Cast lots. It's the only fair way, and there's no need to leave this room. Remember Akridge."

I did remember the traitor and thought of his hideous death without remorse. Boothe was busily breaking toothpicks, which he always carried in his pockets. He finished and showed us five uneven slivers.

"I omitted the professor," he stated. "He's done his bit. Short pick wins honors."

He arranged them in his cupped hand, exposed ends even, and passed them about.

Enloe drew, then Ward and Fenwick and I. We then compared sticks. Boothe chuckled grimly.

"Draughon it is. Are you satisfied, or shall it be a process of elimination?"

But to this I objected, and after some argument the others let me have my way. Woodruff then drew me into the laboratory with him and closed the door behind us. He seated me on a stool while he busied himself at his long table littered with test-tubes, beakers of liquids and other chemical paraphernalia.

"I must work while we talk, Garfield. It will be best for you to start tonight, and this amnesiac must be finished for you. Can you think of a way to contact with Caldoni and the Council?"

My effort to surrender myself an hour or so ago was still in my mind; so I outlined a sketchy plan. He shook his head decidedly, and measured a minute quantity of a colorless liquid in a graduated tube before he spoke.

"I don't like it. They're a suspicious crew, and their spies have doubtless told them we're working on some scheme; hence the willing sacrifice each day to protect you and me. You mustn't have too rigid a search, you know, when you get in their hands."

Right there the difficulty of the task struck me with full force, and I admitted my helplessness.

"There is the weak point," he said. "You must get before the Council with as little interference as possible. At best it's a hazardous job, and if it weren't for

the certain results to be obtained if successful I would abandon the whole scheme. But the future of the world is at stake, Garfield, and it must go through. That fool, Boothe, would rather fight, sating his hate with the blood of thousands rather than accomplishing his end by strategy."

He added a few white crystals to his liquid and watched them dissolve with a foaming action.

"It is almost complete. I will add the volatile agent later."

He turned to me and sat down on the edge of the table.

"I have a plan," he said slowly. "I would go myself, only for the fact that I would have no chance to accomplish my purpose. They will give you that chance because they desire information from you concerning De Berrie. My plan is to have the W-R drop you in Washington tonight. Seemingly you will be trying to avoid notice, but will be picked up. If you think best you can tell them you learned that the Colonists were about to betray you and you fled, believing the safest place was under their noses. That will be plausible and should lull their suspicion so that they will not search you closely for some engine of destruction. Besides, they will be eager to get you before the Council and claim the reward. Of course, if they become too inquisitive you may have to fight your way clear, but I hope not."

He studied for several minutes, then resumed: "Once before the Council, it will not be so difficult, if you undergo the same proceedings as when we faced them before. There will be only Caldoni, Wharton, and one or two others. You can approach them closely under some pretext and spray a quantity of this amnesiac"—he indicated the liquid in the tube—"into the air. In a moment they will be unconscious and remain so for a period determined by the amount of fluid liberated—ample time for your purpose. Then inject the serum in the back of the neck, intramuscular. Afterward it would be best to conceal yourself for a bit to give the drug a chance to do its work. As I remember, the Council room has several filing-cabinets set in curtained alcoves that would offer a temporary refuge. When the drug gets in its action you will be perfectly safe and can explain the whole matter."

"It seems too fantastic to be true," I muttered. "There'll be a slip-up somewhere. Things so wonderful don't work out so smoothly."

"It *will* work," he stated positively. "I have proved it by exhaustive tests on animals; the reaction should be the same with any mammal. The only possibility of a slip-up, as you call it, lies in the application. Once you get the Council, they will bring the rest to heel. In a week there will be clinics in every city and hamlet where the serum will be administered, by force, if necessary."

"But the anesthetic and the hypo—how will I carry them to avoid discovery? And if the amnesiac is to be sprayed openly, how can I escape its effects myself?"

"You will be doctored," he smiled, "or, rather, show the effects of doctoring. On your left hand will grow a monstrous boil with a rubber core containing enough amnesiac for nearly any contingency. By squeezing the boil with thumb or finger the liquid will be discharged. The mustache which you will wear as a disguise will contain minute glass capsules containing a nullifying agent which a brush of your hand will liberate. It will protect you for the required time, as the amnesiac is very volatile and will soon dissipate. The syringe, containing half a

dozen injections of the Serum, can be concealed in a hollow shoe heel which can be fixed by the time you're ready to start."

"You think of everything," I said admiringly.

"I've been studying the matter for days. Now run along home for a few hours' rest. I'll get those fellows in yonder to help me shape things up and get the ship ready."

A SURLY, brown-uniformed guard convoyed me into the Council room and seated me in a chair facing the crescent-shaped desk behind which the Council would gather presently.

"Their Excellencies will be in when they see fit," he admonished me. "You'd better set tight. Curiosity in prisoners ain't healthy. But you've been here before and know it, I reckon." With that he left me and closed the door leading into the corridor.

As the sanctum of the High Tribunal under the Reorganization, the room had some of the features of the ordinary courtroom combined with fixtures of a great private office. Before me sat the desk already mentioned, a few feet out from the back wall which was bare save for the portraits of the gentry who had established the regime. In this wall immediately behind the desk was a small door, used, I knew, exclusively by the Council. Behind me were a number of chairs used during certain conclaves by lesser leaders of the Administration. To either side were huge filing-cabinets built in sections against the walls and extending the full length of the forty-foot room, broken only by a curtained alcove on either side, possibly for the use of clerks transcribing the proceedings. In the lofty ceiling was the great flaring light-cone for use during night sessions of the Council. On the floor was a thick carpet.

It was the custom for prisoners to be left to their own devices for varying periods in this room, and I suspected that the ceiling contained peepholes through which the prisoner could be observed and notes made of his behavior when he fancied himself absolutely alone. So, while I had little belief that I would be subjected to espionage because my guilt was already established, I put on an anxious look as though I feared the worst, though in reality it was difficult to avoid an air of complacence and a chuckle of triumph.

So far everything had gone according to schedule. At midnight the professor's space-ship, the W-R, had landed in the garden of the secluded house where I had lived with friends since my escape from prison. Enloe had accompanied the pilot and brought with him another man who proceeded deftly to make me over in such fashion that I doubted my own identity after a look into a mirror. The boil on my hand was so realistic that it almost throbbed, and I easily fell into the habit of keeping the hand partly raised as though in a sling. I was also equipped with a pair of shoes with one screw-on heel in which Enloe had placed the precious syringe, loaded and ready for use. With my mustache firmly attached I climbed into the space-flyer for the first time since my return from the moon, and we shot into the sky.

An hour later I was sneaking along a motorway a short distance out of Washington, the Tower a lighted spire against the sky. In another hour I had been arrested and exultantly identified. In their eagerness they had swallowed my story without question, given me only the most superficial of searches, and had even joked about my sore hand. Now I was to face

the Council and endure a merciless grilling. I repressed a smile with difficulty.

Twice before I had been in this building; once at the farcical trial which had condemned Woodruff and me to death; a second time in another room from this, where I had undergone an inquisition which had led by devious means to the horrible death of the then guiding light of the Council and his most trusted aide, De Berrie, and the warden of the Glass Prison, Calvin Muir. Caldoni the ruler, Wharton, Papke, Hoffman—lesser lights of the evil regime—had not forgotten that blow, and if this desperate scheme fell flat I could expect the most horrible death inherently cruel minds could devise, and Caldoni was a genius at refined torture.

It must not fail. My own life was of small moment, but those trusting, sacrificing thousands in the Colonies must be freed from bondage and the shadow of dreadful doom lifted from their souls.

I stiffened in my chair as the private door behind the desk swung silently and four men filed solemnly into the chamber.

I THRILLED in every fiber as they took their seats inside the curve of the desk. These four men, Caldoni, Papke, Hoffman, Wharton, held the fate of the Colonies in their hands, and I held theirs in mine! But I maintained a sullen calm; these men were shrewd, and behavior out of character with my situation would arouse their suspicion. So I sat unmoved and returned their cold inspection with the defiant stare I knew they expected. Caldoni pressed a button on the desk, and a hidden loud-speaker filled the room with its blaring voice:

"Garfield Draughon, resident Colony 7; convicted jointly with Nathan Woodruff of conspiracy to revolt; responsible for disappearance of Council-chief Joroon De Berrie, Warden Muir, and one other. Escaped from prison on eve of execution and delivered his accomplice, Woodruff. Arrested 4 a. m. by Inspectors Gregg and Peddy on Motorway 62-A en route to city. Prisoner was seeking refuge in city because of rumor that Colonists were about to surrender him to Council to stop daily executions. Prisoner alone and unarmed."

The facts stated briefly for the edification of the Council, the metallic voice hushed. Caldoni eyed me with stern disfavor, poorly concealing the triumph he felt at having me in his power.

"You have heard the charge. What is your answer?"

"Since I am already convicted, why plead innocence?"

Hoffman and Papke frowned. Caldoni's eyes smoldered. Here, I saw, was a human volcano, quick to erupt his deadly passion. Small wonder that even his associates stood in dread of him and underlings quaked in his presence. But the knowledge of the powerful amnesiac under my fingers gave me courage.

"Where are De Berrie and Muir?" he snapped.

"Where they can no longer harm the Colonies," I answered cheerfully. "Muir was sacrificed by the moon people in their underground temple; De Berrie and I escaped, but De Berrie was killed by a scorpion in the cavern leading from the mountain. Their own greed killed them, not I."

Caldoni's eyes burned as the devils of wrath stirred his temper. "Liar!" he snarled, leaning forward. "Give me the truth or I will have your tongue burned from your throat. Where have you hidden De Berrie and Muir?"

I jumped to my feet. Four flame-pistols flashed up to cover me and for a split

second I hesitated, minded to let them have it by pressing the bulb in my palm, but I was several feet away and to have full effect the amnesiac must be released at close range. If I could gain just four more short steps! So I appeared to be properly awed by their weapons and lifted my arms to show my harmlessness. But I vented my resentment of the insult in speech.

"Gangster methods and gangster odds," I said hotly. "Save your insults for your associates, Caldoni!"

I regretted the foolish bravado almost instantly. My hot temper was jeopardizing my mission, for Caldoni was as unstable as an explosive gas. If I watched my tongue I was fairly safe, for I felt sure they would not harm me while they believed I held information vital to them. Their refusal to accept the truth which I had given them had built a wall of security about me. Under cover of their amazement at my audacity I gained several inches.

Caldoni trembled with fury. His brown eyes grew murky with hate, and Hoffman on one side and Papke on the other laid restraining hands on his arms, speaking swiftly in an undertone.

Whatever they said had an effect, for I could see the tremendous effort the man made to control his passion. His voice shook.

"Come closer!" He beckoned with his pistol and I obeyed with alacrity, coming so near that he motioned me to stop. Then he fastened his hot gaze on my face as if trying to conquer my stubborn spirit with the very deadliness of his power. He raised himself erect, a more commanding position.

"You will tell me about De Berrie and Muir. You will also tell me the whereabouts of Woodruff. Or I will kill you in this room!"

He lifted the flame-pistol menacingly.

He was at the breaking-point. I was cold with fear lest I stretch my bluff too far and spoil everything. But I was not yet in just the position I desired.

"I have told you the truth about De Berrie and Muir, Caldoni," I answered steadily. "I will tell nothing about Professor Woodruff. And you will not kill me here, for the people would not believe that you had captured me at all and your prestige with the masses would be shaken."

His face purpled. The other Councillors rose. I inched forward. Hoffman spoke, worriedly, I thought:

"Draughon, don't be a fool! We will deal leniently with you if you assist us. And if you don't, we will have our way and you will suffer ten thousand deaths for your refusal. We have the power, the wealth, and the might to crush your Colonies if they are not submissive—wipe them from very existence!"

I took a short step, lifting my arm in an apparently innocent dramatic gesture —that potent left arm!

"You, the representatives of organized Evil, have all that you say," I told them earnestly. "But your rule is built on sand. With all your resources you lack the one essential of success in any undertaking—brains! And the brains of civilization are concentrated in the ten Colonies. In the end they will conquer!"

Caldoni spoke softly, huskily, as if to himself.

"I may not kill, but I can maim!" I saw him stealthily lift his pistol. "You shall be carried through the streets of the Colonies a wretched, limbless cripple, the body of a man and nothing more, to show how Luigi Caldoni rewards those who make sport of him!"

The showdown had come. I read it instantly in his eyes. There was no mercy,

no bluff in those hot pools of hate, only malign cruelty swirling in their brown depths. He took quick aim at my uplifted arm—and I clenched my fist!

Almost simultaneously with the ejection of the spray of amnesiac I swept my right hand across the mustache, crushing the capsules of antidote and removing the appendage. The four Councillors stiffened as they inhaled the powerful fumes; then they slumped heavily in the chairs beneath them, heads sagging on their breasts. Caldoni's pistol dropped from his nerveless fingers.

With the pungent fumes of the antidote reeking in my head I acted swiftly. In a jiffy the detachable heel came off and the syringe dropped into my hand. I leaned over Caldoni and shot a heavy dose of the Serum into his neck muscles just at the edge of his hair. Hoffman, Papke, and Wharton got an injection in turn, and I stepped back, my work accomplished. Remained only to conceal myself until the drug had done its work. And then I distinctly heard a noise in the corridor!

I whirled, knocking my hand against the horn of the crescent desk and dropping the syringe which I had intended to put in my pocket. But there was no time to retrieve it; I leaped for the protection of the alcove curtains just as the door opened and a uniformed guard entered the room. Through a fold of the drapery I watched, wishing heartily that I had snatched up Caldoni's pistol.

The man came close to the desk, staring puzzled at the relaxed figures. "Your Excellency——" he began hesitantly, and then stopped.

Caldoni stirred, lifted his head sluggishly and stared vacantly at the guard. The fellow stood there goggling, his mouth open. He was tongue-tied with fear that he had roused the tyrant from a nap and thereby incurred his displeasure. I watched the tableau from my covert with keen interest. In a few moments now Caldoni should react to the heavy dose of Serum. I grinned in happy excitement, and studied Caldoni, who seemed to be recovering more quickly than the others. The guard, afraid to speak until given permission, also waited.

And now if Woodruff's theories and painstaking experiments were accurate should begin the transmogrification of the evil genius who held the Colonies under his iron thumb. The lines of cruelty about his mouth should disappear; the perpetual frown on his forehead should be effaced, and the evil cunning lurking always in his eyes should be succeeded by a look of gentleness and compassion. I waited, confident these things would happen.

Nothing of the sort took place.

But a change there was, one that I could not believe and could only stare at in incredulous amazement, stupefied like the craven guard who was watching open-mouthed. Caldoni's face was altering slowly and through no muscular action of his own. It was losing its human stamp and becoming a mask of consummate evil. Like a mirror it reflected the foul emotions, the malignant passions of the man-brute. Ferocity, rapacity, cunning, lust—in short a monster dwarfing the foul creation of Frankenstein was emerging from what had once been a man. And as the awful thing was a-borning there was growing upon me the numbing conviction that I was responsible for the horrible metamorphosis, because in some way, for some reason, *the syringe had been loaded with the Virus of Hell!*

Stark terror gripped me. My brain reeled as it comprehended the enormity of the thing that had happened. Before

we had lived in the shadow of fear and suffering, enduring much at the hands of our oppressors. But those oppressors had been human. Now they were devils, fiends from the Pit whose orgies of blood and rapine would shame the deeds of Lucifer himself in the reign of Hell they would inaugurate.

To this day I have regretted that I didn't rush Caldoni and try to get the pistol he had dropped and kill them all. If I had succeeded it would have saved many lives and incalculable agony. But I didn't, and the secret knowledge of my cowardice has shamed me cruelly. Yet most men would have been just as craven as I in the same situation. I was a score of feet from Caldoni, with a heavy desk intervening, and the pistol was on the floor by his feet. The man was alert now, fully recovered from the anesthetic, and endeavoring to readjust his mind to the new sensation he was doubtless experiencing. The other Councillors were stirring, reviving rapidly. Moreover, while the guard was seemingly petrified with wonderment and fright, he was fully armed and would regain his wits quickly enough at sight of a prisoner running amok.

I repeat that I am ashamed of my lack of courage to take the chance, small though it certainly was, in the light of what subsequently happened. My only consolation is that it was Destiny.

Caldoni spoke, his voice vibrant with menace.

"The prisoner—Draughon—where is he?"

The guard jerked tremblingly to attention and stammered:

"Your Excellency—I—I do not know. Isn't he here?"

"Fool! Do you see him? Where have you been? Answer, dog!"

The harsh words completed the fellow's demoralization. He pleaded abjectly for mercy.

"Your Excellency—I—have mercy on me! I have not left my post at the door save to bring Mr. Hoffman a message from his daughter saying she is coming——"

"You lie!" Caldoni stooped swiftly and recovered the pistol, pointing it at the guard. "Ten thousand hells shall you suffer for letting him escape!"

His voice rose to a scream. His hand lifted, a thin sheet of flame leaped from the pistol and the guard's half-lifted left arm dropped from its shoulder and thumped suddenly on the floor.

A scream of horror broke from the man's lips. It had happened so swiftly that he scarcely realized it. He stared stupidly at the thing by his feet, his lips working soundlessly.

But the end was not yet. Maddened by the scene before him, his new-born cruelty whetted by the act, Caldoni shifted his aim and lopped off the remaining arm. Then, as the man crumpled in a faint, the monster deliberately severed each leg at the hip and regarded the shambles with deep satisfaction. The other Councillors, now fully awake, applauded the deed.

Caldoni pressed a button. In a few moments another uniformed man appeared, who shrank back horrified from the thing on the floor, yet was quick-witted enough to save himself a like fate, perhaps, by saluting smartly and affecting to ignore that which had turned his face as gray as a corpse.

"The prisoner, Draughon, has escaped," Caldoni said coldly. "See that the building is searched and the exits guarded. If he is not returned in two hours, every attendant in the Tower shall become like that thing on the floor who failed in his duty. Send in clearers to remove this offal."

The attendant saluted again with a hand that trembled, and withdrew. After he had gone, Caldoni spoke to his confreres, and they rose and filed out the private door, leaving me alone with the luckless wretch who had been the first to reap the horror I had innocently sown.

He might live—the Flame cut cleanly with no loss of blood, cauterizing the stump; but far better should he never awake. I stared at the mess of arms and legs and shuddered numbly. I was the cause of that, and in a few minutes more I would suffer a like fate, or worse. Through the slightly open door I could hear footsteps hurriedly approaching, and from my slit in the curtains I watched with tense nerves. When the searchers came close enough I would take them by surprize, seize a pistol and at least take some of my enemies with me. I would never be taken alive, a plaything for Caldoni's fiendish torture.

THE door was pushed wide and two men in the familiar brown suits entered with a stretcher and began to pick up the pieces of their luckless fellow. My taut nerves relaxed a little; these men were intent only on their clean-up job, with no thought of prisoners. So thorough indeed was their work that one of them, looking about him to make sure the task was done, spied the shiny barrel of the little syringe lying half buried in the deep pile of the carpet. With a muttered word to his companion he walked over to the desk and picked it up, scrutinized it closely, and dropped it into his pocket. Then they picked up their ghastly burden and hurried away, closing the door behind them. I cursed my awkwardness in dropping the syringe, which still held a couple of cubic centimeters, but in the stress of my predicament I thought little of it. My escape was already known; so the clue amounted to nothing. Even if the fellow turned his find over to the Council they would think it had contained the amnesiac which I had used to put them to sleep.

But I could not stay in my hiding-place indefinitely; sooner or later the alcoves would be searched and I would be discovered—at a disadvantage. Better to be caught making a bid for freedom than be trapped like a rat. I stepped from behind the curtains, intent on investigating what lay behind the Council's private door, and had gained the middle of the room when I brought up with a jerk, an icy thrill coursing over me.

The corridor door behind me had opened!

I whirled, poised to leap and attack with the ferocity of a trapped animal fighting for its life. But the effort died a-borning, my lifted arms hung limply and I sheepishly muttered:

"I beg your pardon!"

The girl surveyed me coolly, critically. For my part I knew that I was facing the prettiest young woman I had ever seen. She was dressed in an aviator's costume of soft leather and she held her helmet crushed in one small, gauntleted hand. Her cheeks were abloom with health and the zest of youth sparkled in her blue eyes. Despite the desperate peril of my position I felt a thrill that most certainly was not prompted by danger; under other circumstances I should have enjoyed the meeting immensely, though I had always been rather shy in the company of women, but in this case she undoubtedly meant disaster. I tore my mind from the allure of her and wondered who she could be who thus boldly entered the Council room when the Council was presumably in session. It was a step not lightly taken. Then I remembered the

half-delivered message of the luckless guard. She was Hoffman's daughter.

The recognition effectually dampened my little thrill of admiration. Caldoni's torture would be rendered not one whit more endurable by my being delivered to it even by the prettiest of women. At the same time my whole nature revolted at the thought of being brutal to this beautiful girl, beating her into unconsciousness so that I could make my escape. No! A principle is a principle, even if foolish and quixotic.

"And you, I take it, are the prisoner, Draughon, whose supposed escape has turned every attendant in the Tower into a madman! You do not look dangerous."

She said it musingly; there was neither fright nor malice in the low, clear tones. A wild hope flared in my mind.

"I'm sure I'm not, Miss Hoffman," I smiled, putting every atom of winsomeness I possessed into my voice. "I'm just a badly frightened young man in the most desperate plight one could imagine, wondering how long you will postpone calling a guard."

"You know me?" she asked, surprized, ignoring my hint.

Swiftly I told her what had occurred, not omitting the fate of the wretch who had attempted to deliver her message to her father. When I concluded she frowned and her eyes darkened with anger.

"Caldoni is a brute!" she exclaimed bluntly with a fine disregard for possible consequences. "He controls the Council body and soul—including my father. I'm glad you thwarted him this once."

She studied for a bit, appraising me again with her eyes. I waited, hardly daring to hope, yet conscious that her very hesitation was a point in my favor. Would she leave me without giving the alarm?

Sudden determination showed in her eyes and her small chin tilted stubbornly. She came to me and held out her ungloved right hand impulsively. I took it and, not without some grace, I hope, bent low, kissing it. The impulse had come to me spontaneously, this revival of a courtly custom almost forgotten by our generation. A faint flush deepened the pink in her cheeks, but she was not displeased.

"I like you, Mr. Draughon," she said frankly. "Come. I have decided to help you!"

A LITTLE dazed by the sudden turn of events, I followed her through the private door and up a spiraling stair which led us to the flat roof of the Tower. The landing-stage was bare, as a hasty glance proved, save for a slim stratoplane. Straight to the machine she led the way with never a glance to the side or behind to see if we were observed. With superb nerve she opened the door and motioned me into the snug, low cabin, as if she were taking an honored guest for an outing instead of conniving at the escape of the most badly wanted prisoner on the continent. She took her seat at the controls and headed the ship upward obliquely across the freight and passenger lanes until she slipped into the stratosphere, straightening out at forty thousand feet. Then she cut the speed to a mere coast, locked the controls and turned about.

"That was easy," she smiled, giving me her eyes freely. "But now that I have you, Mr. Draughon, I confess I don't know what to do with you!"

She pointed to the observation mirror on the instrument board.

"See those ships quartering the field of view? Those are military scouts investigating all pleasure and commercial craft. I caught the order going out just as I landed on the Tower. Were I to set

you down anywhere, you would be taken at once, and I should be obliged to explain to Caldoni why I had turned traitress." She sniffed her contempt of the Council chief. "So, what am I to do?"

Her words banished the sense of security which the removal from immediate danger had engendered in my mind. It began to look like a case of the frying-pan versus the fire. But I found it strangely difficult to concentrate on my own peril. My thoughts had strayed into channels new to them but alluringly sweet, and I found it hard to analyze my emotions. Was I falling in love with this enemy of my people, a daughter of the infamous Council? Reason told me that she was among them, but not of them; but was a girlish impulse, born of pity for my hopeless plight, a true indication of her real character?

And yet there was no ignoring the turmoil in my mind, no setting aside of the sweet thrill her presence and her interest in me afforded by cold logic. Why, I was realizing this minute that the peril she had got herself into was giving me more real concern than my own desperate plight!

"The best course is to get rid of me as soon as possible," I told her earnestly. "Land me anywhere and let me shift for myself. I couldn't enjoy freedom knowing that you had paid for it, and a plane may stop us any minute——"

She shook her small, helmeted head. "This ship has the insignia of the Council on wings and hull. They will never stop me unless I should make some blunder. But we can't cruise about for ever. I'm expecting a radio from dad any minute."

She looked apprehensively toward the small loud-speaker in a corner of the cabin, then fell to studying me searchingly.

"Miss Hoffman," I begged, "consider yourself. You probably do not realize just how badly wanted I am, and just how frenzied the Council is at this moment. I——" and then I hesitated, wondering how much it would be safe to tell her of myself and our plans. Surely I could not tell her that my scheme had miscarried and I had made a ravening beast of her father! Swiftly I covered my confusion plausibly:

"Oh, well, I may as well make a clean breast of everything. I have been in hiding in Colony 6—you know, of course, where it is situated—and I came to Washington for the express purpose of winning the Council over to us by means of a wonderful drug, a discovery of Professor Woodruff, whom you have doubtless heard much of lately. The plan miscarried, but I managed to hide in an alcove, from which I had just emerged when you found me. Not even your father could save you from Caldoni's fury if he gets an inkling of this. Land me at once —signal one of those scouts—take me back to the Tower, anything, only wash your hands of me before they find out. Believe me, I'd rather die a thousand deaths than have you suffer one moment at the hands of that fiend!"

I hushed, realizing that I was speaking so warmly in the stress of my new emotion that it savored of melodrama. And my eyes must have been even more eloquent, for she colored hotly and her own eyes fell. The next moment they lifted, narrowed, and her voice was a little chilly.

"If I thought you believed I would do such a thing I would do it at once. I don't do things by halves, Mr. Draughon, and not all of us outside the Colonies approve of the International Council, or deserve the character that they merit."

I mumbled an apology, but she didn't even hear it. Her mobile features cleared

swiftly and a sunshiny smile broke out. She clapped her hands together delightedly.

"The very thing!" she exclaimed. "Safe; perfectly safe. And what a huge joke on Mr. Caldoni!"

She turned quickly to the controls, studying the compass and the observation mirror. I couldn't tell what course she selected, but I knew that we began a slow, descending spiral. Some time later we landed with a slight jar, and we climbed out onto the landing-stage atop a tall building.

For one unnerving moment I thought she had returned to the Tower, but she airily beckoned me to follow and led the way to a door which opened onto a narrow staircase. We descended two or three flights and passed into a corridor thickly carpeted and illuminated softly by subdued light-cones. Finally she opened a door and motioned me into a luxurious apartment.

"Not even Caldoni dares enter here, Mr. Draughon!" she cried triumphantly. "My home!"

I halted in consternation. "But—but—Miss Hoffman——" I stammered in confusion.

She drew herself up regally, her eyes flashing.

"Your hesitancy, sir, is not flattering! I said this was *my* home, not my father's!" She eyed me levelly. "I trust that was why you seemed to hesitate?"

Touchy! As proud as a queen, and, queen-like, her motives were not to be questioned. I was reared by grandparents who refused to accept the changing customs and my ideas of propriety had been obsolete for a generation. I made haste to regain lost ground.

"My thought was only of you," I mumbled.

She smiled quick forgiveness and rested her hand briefly on my arm. Then she fixed a satisfying lunch for the two of us, and we chatted for an hour. Then she rose, worriedly, and said:

"I must be gone for a while. I'm worried because I haven't had a radio from dad. In the library are books, the announcer, and the television mirror. I'll be back presently with the latest inside news and we'll map out a plan to get you away safely."

BUT it was night when she returned, struggling bravely against a terrible agitation, her eyes reddened with weeping.

"My father," she said in answer to my anxious question. "Dead!"

Her chin quivered, tears welled afresh from her eyes, and she buried her face child-like against my coat and cried unrestrainedly. I comforted her as best I could and patted her shoulder in a man's awkward attempt to soften a sorrow that only time can assuage. Curiosity, sympathy, and above all, a dark shadow of suspicion filled my mind. Presently she drew away and lifted her head, striving to regain control of herself.

"It happened hours ago," she said dully. "The Council were entering their private shuttle after a conference to go to the ground floor of the Tower. Dad was the last to enter and the shuttle started too soon. He stepped under the panel and into the open tube."

Suspicion ripened. "Was Caldoni in the shuttle?"

She flashed me a look of bitter understanding. "I think so, too. Yes, he was at the control."

Tragedy again. The Virus of Hell! I could see Caldoni starting the shuttle a split-second too quick, allowing his compatriot to step into the empty shuttle-tube for a thousand-foot fall. I could almost

hear the faint echo of sardonic laughter floating up the dark cylinder to meet the luckless man plunging to his death.

"I must be gone for two or three days. You will be safe, and there is ample food in the storage room. Under no circumstances try to get away from the apartment, for there is a tight cordon of guards about the city. Caldoni executed the Tower attendants this afternoon; so you may be sure of a sharp lookout. They are confident you are still in the city and are determined that you shall not get away. You will be here when I return?"

She looked at me mutely pleading. I promised.

THE next three days were a nightmare of suspense. I paced those rooms until I nearly wore paths in the thick pile of the rugs. I turned over a thousand schemes in my mind and discarded them as fast as they formed. Without outside aid, escape was simply impossible. The prestige of the Council was at stake; the lives of countless guards depended upon my recapture, and there was no chance of a relaxing of their interest.

The announcer kept me abreast of current events. Through it I learned the details of Hoffman's funeral at his old home in Maryland; of the large number of planes which formed the cortege; and of the subsequent departure of Miss Merrilee Hoffman with her aunt for a brief visit to New York. But of the Colonies there was no mention, and the news service was strangely silent concerning my escape and Caldoni's activities. Censored, I decided with disappointment.

Nor was the television mirror more productive of information. The second and third days I kept the mirror charged and viewed the Colonies in rotation, a wearisome and monotonous task as the hours produced only the peaceful scenes of small cities going about their daily affairs. It seemed ominously significant that the daily executions had ceased without apparent rime or reason.

Why? Because Caldoni was hatching some subtle, yet horrible, deviltry! Of this I was certain; and when, the morning of the fourth day, the girl hurriedly entered the apartment, the look of stark horror on her sweet face confirmed my forebodings. She threw herself into a chair and stared at me in such evident distress that I listened for the tread of Caldoni's men in the corridor.

"The Colonies!" she brought out at last. "Oh, those poor people!"

Little by little I got the story, a story so packed with horror and agony, with brutish lust and nameless evil, that I shall give none of the harrowing details here. A horde of murderous devils, five hundred strong, the very scum and riffraff of the cesspools of crime, had descended on Colony 7 last night. They had beaten down the resistance of the able-bodied men (possession of lethal weapons by Colonists was strictly forbidden) and staged a saturnalia of crime that beggars description. Murder and pillage and rapine were followed by the torch, and this morning the beautiful little city mourned over its ashes while the specter of death haunted hundreds of families. The foul horde had withdrawn from the ruins to a camp by the Potomac to which they had taken a number of young women and the spoil they had gathered, spoil which, it seemed, was disappointingly meager. I could well understand that last, for the Council had impoverished the Colonies by excessive taxation, a policy which was to be followed by a bitter sequel.

I was sick with horror. Colony 7 had been my home until I became a fugitive. I had no relatives, but all my friends,

save Professor Woodruff, had lived there. I asked thickly:

"And the Council took no action?"

She shook her head. "Caldoni is busy and refuses to be seen or disturbed. I was told confidentially that he is personally conducting some experiments in the National Laboratory, but I know he is no chemist; so the report must be false."

But I knew the report was true, damnably true! That sharp-eyed attendant had thought to curry favor with Caldoni by giving him that cursed syringe, and Caldoni in turn had taken it to the Federal chemists. And with the knowledge of the contents of the syringe, the devilish subtlety of the fiend had contrived a revenge that was diabolically perfect. No wonder the executions had ceased; there must be plenty of victims for this new torture, beside which the clean death of the Flame was a mercy. And once the Virus had been analyzed, it was simple for modern chemists to produce the stuff in quantities. Then Caldoni had gathered a motley crew of ruffians, inoculated them and turned them loose to wreak their raging cruelty on the helpless Colonies.

"I must go back," I told her. "Those are my people and my place is with them. There might be some way I could help in stopping this slaughter."

"I thought you would want to go," she said dully. "Do you know you are going to your death? I didn't tell you all of it. It is whispered that Caldoni means to annihilate the Colonies. Every hour is bringing men into Washington, men selected and summoned by Caldoni himself from all over the continent. And those of us who do not approve, dare not object."

"Good God!" I muttered aghast. "And the Colonies are weaponless! Surely there are enough high-minded people in the country to prevent such wholesale murder!"

"There are!" she defended with a flare of her old spirit. "But they are leaderless, and by the time they could be organized it would be too late. Caldoni rules by might and fear, and these men he is gathering around him are his trusted aides and supporters. They would quell a hasty rebellion at once. My father once told Caldoni he would bring about the downfall of the Administration by his wanton cruelty, and nearly lost his life for his plain talk. No, my friend, only Caldoni's death can avert national disaster!"

"All the more reason why I should not sit idly here and let him accomplish his hellish work! The Colonies must be warned!"

"Yes, but I can warn them without exposing you to danger."

"You?" I cried in astonishment. "Why should you risk yourself in such a way?"

"Because—because——" Her voice trembled and her eyes filled. A suspicion as sweet as it was incredible swept into my mind. I started toward her, but she eluded me, lifting her hand.

"I knew you would go," she said tremulously. "It is what I would want you to do, only—only—so I prepared a way. I have permission to go back to Maryland with some—some flowers. You can hide under them."

She went into her bedroom. When she came back she was in her jaunty aviator's costume of soft leather. But the glow and vivacity which I had associated with the garb was absent. She beckoned me to follow and we went out on the roof.

THERE was no trouble. The aerial patrol stopped us in the passenger lane—I heard the thump of the magnetic grapnels as they shot a bridge across to us over a few feet of space. The door opened, letting in a wave of icy air followed by an officer's head, which I could

just get a peep of through my leafy bower. He saluted the girl respectfully, cast a perfunctory glance around and passed us on, never dreaming that the mass of loosely piled flowers and wreaths concealed the notorious Garfield Draughon. But the girl would not let me come out until she landed, some time later.

To my surprize I recognized the familiar pines of the Georgian landscape and in the near distance a small city which could only be Colony 6. I turned to her in astonished gratification.

"You could never have made it across country," she said. "Good luck and—good-bye!"

She held out both her hands, her eyes swimming. I took them—and her. And there in that old abandoned field whose barren sand streaks were hot under the glare of the Southern sun we forgot the smoke of burning homes, the cruelty of human beasts, and the dark shadow of nameless peril that was sweeping on to engulf us in its sinister gloom. We remembered only that we lived—and loved!

I watched until the tiny plane disappeared in the fathomless blue, my heart sick with longing and fear and gloomy forebodings. Then I tore myself away from the spot, and hurried on to the Colony with my ominous tidings.

PURELY by accident I ran into Enloe almost at once. I had long since shaved off my mustache, and he recognized me. But there was no welcome in his somber eyes as he jerked his head for me to follow him into a dim little restaurant, where he selected a table behind a screen.

"Spies are everywhere," he explained shortly. "It's death to be seen with you. Great God, Draughon, what did you do?"

I told him briefly, concluding with:

"Who loaded that syringe?"

"I did myself. The bottle, however, was handed to me by Boothe. I've lain awake nights wondering if he could have done such a thing as—oh, it's possible; indeed, it's the only explanation. Queer fellow, Boothe, thinking of violence only as a means to an end. I believe it was he who instigated the attack on Woodruff a few days ago. He is now trying to organize a column to attack Washington and seize the Council!"

"Is he mad?"

"We are all mad, Draughon," he said despondently. "The tragedy of Number 7 infuriated the people. Some of them blame you and Woodruff, and it's fortunate that you met me before you were recognized. Let's go to the laboratory. I'm taking care of Woodruff there, and besides, it's too dangerous to remain here."

By devious ways and unfrequented streets he led the way to the vacant building, owned by him, which stood over our underground retreat. The city seemed unnaturally still, brooding somberly under threat of the approaching doom. Enloe opened the secret panel and I hurried down the ramp and into the dimly lighted chamber, where I saw a figure lying on a cot.

Woodruff caught my hand eagerly, looking up with pain-filled eyes. "I know what happened, Garfield, and who was responsible, but the populace hold it against you and me. They are not to be blamed, poor people. They have suffered deeply. But tell me what Caldoni is doing?"

The two listened horrified while I told them of the massing of gunmen from all parts of the continent, and of their transformation into raging fiends with the Virus of Hell. Woodruff's eyes glowed feverishly, while Enloe jumped up and began to pace the floor, muttering to himself.

"Twice we have been betrayed, Garfield," said the scientist, picking nervously at the sheet, "this time through mistaken zeal. Boothe is a hothead; he believed that the matter could be best settled by violence, so he forced the issue. He hates the Council so bitterly that he wants their death, not their reformation. The poison is as active in his system as in Caldoni's, only it seeks its outlet through slightly different channels. He is the Caldoni of the Colonies."

"When will the attack begin, Draughon?" Enloe stopped his pacing to ask the question. I knew he was thinking of his family.

"Within a few hours at most. Miss Hoffman remarked as she flew over their camp that planes were concentrating there in force, and there were other signs of activity. Of course, they may select some other——"

"A few hours! Ah, no one can predict the movements of madmen! They may be attacking even now——"

He rushed from the laboratory into the small conclave room.

"He has gone to watch the mirror," Woodruff explained. "For days we have lived under the shadow of doom. Since the tragedy of Number 7, the women and children are kept together ready to be rushed into the swamps at the first alarm, and a watchman has been stationed at the city mirror day and night. Until two days ago, when a half-crazed mob attacked me, I have worked day and night compounding the Serum——"

"Serum!" I echoed. Like Boothe I had seen enough of the cursed stuff.

"Et tu, Brute?" Woodruff smiled sadly. "We shall need it, son. We are on the eve of a new life, a new Jerusalem. But first shall come Armageddon——"

Prophetic words! He was interrupted by the shrill, mighty scream of a radio siren which penetrated even this sealed room. Almost instantly came a shout from Enloe, a shout which was drowned at the last by the hoarse voice of the announcer blaring the alarm of the city watchman:

"They are coming—they are coming! Remember the women and children!"

The voice stopped short as the watcher at the mirror presumably rushed away to lend a hand in the frantic preparations.

"Garfield!" Woodruff's voice snapped me to attention. He had lifted himself to the side of the cot, and his eyes gleamed with a hot brilliance. "Hand me that square bottle on the shelf above the atomoscope. Quick!"

Swiftly I gave it him, and he shook from it two large black tablets, one of which he swallowed.

"Thenopolin," he said. "A marvelous stimulant, but dangerous. I keep it for emergencies. Now help me."

He got weakly to his feet and took a staggering step. I helped him into his clothes, and he strengthened rapidly. The tablet seemed to have poured vigor into his muscles and nerves, for when he was ready he hurried me to the exit panel. Enloe had disappeared.

IN THE street men were hurrying about, secreting their valuables, gathering what crude weapons they could muster, and routing out a few brave, stubborn women who had resolved to stay with their men. They paid no attention to us until we turned south at a fast trot down a narrow street and caught up with a large column of women and children under the convoy of a picked guard who were hurrying them along to shelter in the near-by swamp.

These men, seeing us fleeing, sought to halt us and began to throw stones and hiss when we ran on past. I was as puzzled

at Woodruff's behavior as the indignant guards, but to my panted questions he paid no attention until we reached the edge of a thin growth of scrub oak that marked the boundary of the swamp. Then he slowed to a fast walk.

"The W-R—is in—this swamp—ahead," he said jerkily. "It's—only hope!"

He swayed and would have fallen if I hadn't caught him. He sank to the ground and dug his fingers spasmodically into the sand while he fought against the pain of his broken ribs.

"We are not flying from the danger, Garfield. We are taking the only means of repairing the damage done by that hot-headed fool, Boothe. It means slaughter; God, what slaughter! And the innocent must die with the guilty. But it is the only way," he murmured to himself, a film of pain clouding the unnatural brilliance of his eyes. "I have prayed we could avoid it, but it must be. Come. We have no time to lose.

"We could not have helped them back there," he said suddenly as we pushed our way through the undergrowth. "We would only have been killed with the rest of them, and then would have come the end of civilization!"

He continued to talk half to himself, his voice vibrant with a strange excitement. I knew he was feverish, and thought he was uttering the wild fancies of irresponsibility.

"Strange that on two men should depend the fate of civilization, Garfield, after nature has labored on the race for a million years! That we two should be the instruments to end the reign of Evil on earth and usher in the dawn of a brighter day, christening it with the blood of thousands!"

He laughed wildly. "A figure of speech—blood. The Dew kills horribly, but bloodlessly."

My mind reeled at the import of his words. Memories came to me, memories of the tales I had heard in my childhood, blood-curdling stories of the War of the Chemists, and the vanishing of cities.

The Dew of Death! That dread chemical which brought such horror into the world that after the War its use was unanimously abolished by the nations, the formula destroyed, and experiments leading toward its re-discovery prohibited under pain of death! I felt certain now that the feverish chemist was raving, and I was sick at heart, but his next words shook my conviction.

"When those ravening wolves descended on Colony 7 they little dreamed that beneath their feet lay the agent that would avenge their crimes!" He was still talking half to himself, weaving through the undergrowth as he searched for landmarks, seemingly oblivious to my presence. "I stumbled on the formula accidentally and made a quantity of it before I realized the blackness of the deed I was planning against my fellow men. But against mad dogs, ah, it is different. It is legitimate. God himself sanctions its use as a weapon in the hands of the weak and oppressed. No one knew of the cylinders of death in our old laboratory, Garfield. Not Akridge, the traitor. Not even you. I had thought to let them lie buried for ever, but there came this mistake. Only they can now cope with the Virus of Hell. And who knows but that Boothe performed his act at the behest of Destiny? Ah, the ship!"

We had almost bumped into the W-R hidden in the dense undergrowth of the swamp. We fought our way around its tapering hull until we came to the lock. But I had to boost Woodruff into the opening, for he was too exhausted to climb in unaided.

I closed the lock and took the controls

while he lay down to rest. I lifted the ship gently out of the tangle of brush and above the tree-tops, where the vision mirror gave a clear field of observation.

The sky was dotted with planes. Like a swarm of dragon-flies they came zooming out of the north to drop in a swift spiral to the fields about the city. The mirror showed swarms of men leaping from them, converging from all sides upon the doomed Colony. Woodruff came up and peered over my shoulder at the grim scene.

"Altitude, Garfield." His voice was clear now, but tinged with pain. "We dare not risk a battle in the air. We can't help our friends, but we can avenge them. Make all speed to Number 7."

WE SHOT upward until the earth was but a dim panorama of blurred colors; then I straightened out at tremendous speed, the thin air of the stratosphere offering little resistance. Fifteen minutes later the mirror pictured our objective and I poised the ship and dropped like a plummet, snapping on the repulsion beam at a scant five hundred feet to float to an easy landing. Our descent had been so swift I was confident no chance patrol had observed it, and as the mirror showed the city to be deserted, we climbed out of the lock and stared about at the blackened ruins.

I swore deeply at the scene of desolation and destruction, shuddering as I glimpsed a blackened human hand, a woman's hand, lying in the street attracting a swarm of flies. The bodies had been removed, but the men had overlooked this mute reminder of that night of horror. The professor grasped my arm.

"Men die while we brood, Garfield. Back to the ship and land at the laboratory. We can not carry the cylinders far. I should have told you."

I took the controls again and lifted the ship over the ruins to the precipitous hillside near by, in which was the hidden workshop, a partly natural cavern which I had not seen since the night I took De Berrie, Muir, and Akridge on their fatal voyage to the moon. But the place had not been ravaged, due to the Council's ignorance of its existence.

The chemist led the way to the back, where the cave narrowed to a mere fissure, ending in a blank wall of earth.

He pushed a light bar into my hand. "I built that wall, Garfield. The cylinders are stored behind it. Take this bar and dig."

I worked desperately, and in a short while the crowbar broke through the packed earth. Soon the hole was large enough, and I crawled through, flashing on a light.

The fissure was packed with slim steel cylinders, tapering to a valve at one end on which there was a threaded snout. There were twenty of them, and we labored mightily getting them out of the narrow place and carrying them to the W-R, where we packed them in the stern convenient to a two-inch vent-pipe in the floor through which they could be discharged. Then we climbed aboard and turned south with our cargo of frightful death.

But it had taken time to load the cylinders, and a little more to encompass the thousand-mile round trip. Even before we reached the Colony I knew we were too late; the mirror was fogged with the blurry light rays reflected from weaving clouds of smoke, and far, far below us I began to see black specks of planes shooting swiftly into the north, their work of destruction finished.

Woodruff seemed to have steeled his heart.

"Don't take it so hard, son. We could have done nothing if we had got back sooner. The Dew doesn't discriminate between friend and foe. We must follow them to their base, where we can wipe them from the face of the earth they desecrate."

I shan't describe clearly the scenes and events following our arrival in what had once been Colony 6. Even now the memory nauseates me and my dreams are filled with horrid phantoms that beckon me with blackened fingers and shake bloody heads when I try desperately to explain that I was not wholly to blame for the catastrophe precipitated by Dennison Boothe.

But he paid the penalty for his deed. We found him in the street, mutilated beyond description. Only by his cold, tawny eyes did I recognize him, eyes which the agony of death had left wide and staring. The women and children were saved—ironic mercy, perhaps, since they were spared only to mourn the loss of husbands, sweethearts, and fathers. We found the bodies of a few devoted women who had killed themselves on the broken bodies of their loved ones. Others wandered aimlessly about, staring unseeingly at the heaps of the slain, dumb with a grief that seared their very souls. We labored with the yet alive until the sun rose next morning, flooding afresh the scene of horror with light that rendered the ruins and tragedies more starkly poignant. Then we climbed aboard the W-R and drove swiftly toward the source of the nameless evil which had wrought this havoc, the professor utterly exhausted, and myself buoyed up only by the grim determination to blast Caldoni and his horde of fiends back into the hell from which they had sprung.

As before, I trusted to altitude to screen us until we reached our objective. Then we could drop, discharge our dread cargo and climb swiftly back to heights impossible for a plane. But it was not danger of meeting the patrol which occupied my mind. I was thinking of Merrilee and our parting in that sun-drenched field. Was she also thinking of me? And would she mourn me as dead when the news of the massacre reached her city?

As if in answer to my thoughts the mirror in front of me pictured the Administration city miles below, and a cluster of white planes parked in a great field on the bank of the Potomac. I shut off speed and began to drop. Woodruff, I saw, had dragged himself to his post and was screwing a length of hose to the snout of a cylinder. While I watched, he removed the cap from the vent-pipe and lowered the hose so that it trailed a few feet below the hull. With his hand on the release-valve he waited for my signal, a white-haired Nemesis with death in his fingers.

I kept a sharp lookout for a patrol craft; the fact that we had sighted none so far was in itself suspicious, and I expected to be greeted by a swarm of them at any moment. But we fell to five hundred feet unmolested and I risked a survey of the ground below. This was more disquieting than the unnatural absence of patrol craft. The great encampment was deserted, save for the tents and the scores of planes. I shouted to Woodruff to stay his hand.

"There isn't a soul here! The camp is dead as a hammer. Where can they have gone?"

THE scientist staggered forward and studied the mirror. Then he turned to me with a look on his face such as I had never seen, the look, I imagine, of

the Avenging Angel contemplating the destruction of the ungodly!

"Think, Garfield, think!" His voice was vibrant with exultation. "Does a mad dog respect his master? Caldoni changed slumbering brutes into ravening wolves who lusted for blood, loot, and women. In the two colonies they destroyed they got no loot, thanks to the Council's own avariciousness; in the last they got no women, due to our forethought!" His voice became hushed as he drove home his terrible point: "At the very door of their camp was the richest city in the world—a city famed for its beautiful women. The wolves have returned to the master who bred them!"

Appalled by his prediction, I shifted the direction-finder on the mirror until the city sprang into the field. Distance gave us a full, though minute, view of the whole terrain. And from the south came streams of tiny men who swarmed rapidly through the streets. The horde had fallen upon the Administration city!

"The well-spring of Evil will be dredged to its depths," murmured the professor, falling back into his strain of feverish but prophetic speech. "Caldoni the archfiend is falling at the hands of the monsters he created, and Organized Crime is reaping the whirlwind it sowed. The God of Justice caused Caldoni to gather the flower of the cohorts of Evil into one spot that they might be destroyed at the height of their triumph, and a new Jerusalem arise from the ashes of Babylon!"

He staggered back to his cylinder, still muttering. Here I may add that at the conclusion of our desperate venture Woodruff paid outraged nature the penalty by being confined to his bed for three months, recovering eventually to rank high in the councils of the new government.

I drove the great ship low over the house-tops of the city, and Death perched his grim skeleton on our stern and rode with us. We were not molested, since the aerial patrol had either joined the invaders or fled the city as thousands of the townfolk had done at the first warning, the mirror showing swarms of departing planes, and motorways choked with the fleeing columns of the poor. Had it not been that I felt certain Merrilee had escaped in her plane, I confess, with some shame perhaps, that I could not have gone through with my part in what history now refers to as the end of the Crime Era. Nevertheless I kept a sharp eye on the roof-tops over which we skimmed, hoping to identify the landing-stage frequented by her dear self.

I began the first loop of a great flat spiral which would shorten with each lap, beginning at the outskirts of the city so that none might take alarm and escape retribution, until we should end our ghastly journey over the source of the foul corruption—the Tower building of the infamous International Council.

Behind us a faint, almost invisible fog was forming like one of the great ephemeral nebulæ of space from which the worlds and the flaming suns are born. In truth, the simile is apt, for from this deadly man-made nebula a new world of Honor, Justice and Love was evolved. But the agony of its birth was awful.

Tiny golden crystals, propelled by a gas of its own generation, spewed from the trailing hose; crystals which combined with the oxygen in the air and formed the pale mist in our wake. This mist was invisible from below, for it melted rapidly, drifting down in a fine precipitation like an imperceptible drizzle out of an apparently clear sky. And the ravening horde below, intent on murder and looting and ravishment, tore at their throats

and bodies in throes of torture and knew not whence came their death. I would not turn on the audio attachment of the mirror, lest my purpose weaken, but I knew that the triumphant shouts of the destroying fiends were changing into yells of terror and pain, and then into choking gasps that were quickly stilled.

Incessantly trickled the golden crystals from the cylinders of death, replenished when emptied by one whose strength for the task was upheld only by the conviction that he was the instrument of God's vengeance. Steadily fell the ghastly precipitation, filming the city with the Dew —and death.

Thousands died, some innocent, no doubt, among the many guilty. They were martyrs to the cause, unwillingly, perchance, but unavoidably. But it was horrible.

And then I screamed and tore at the controls like a madman. Below and not a hundred yards ahead of the relentlessly advancing curtain of death was a tiny figure on a landing-stage, a figure that waved a white scarf and looked upward at the great ship of metal soaring so near at hand.

Merrilee!

To this day I have no clear idea of what I did, or how. I only know that somehow I managed to land the spaceship on the stage and grasped her dear form just in time to save it from the pale mist of the condensing crystals, a few feet behind us. I believe that I threw her bodily through the lock! But the slightest touch of that damp nebula would have taken her from me for ever.

I would have followed her unhesitatingly.

And at last, poised over the iniquitous Tower, we looked shudderingly down on the city of the dead, Merrilee's hand fast clasped in my own. Professor Woodruff lurched forward, muttering:

"It is finished—man's bondage to Crime. The night was dark, but the dawn shall be glorious! Caldoni has perished, exhorting his evil spawn, and the Virus of Hell has burned a path for the Serum of Right to follow! God's in His heaven, all's well——"

He crumpled to the floor unconscious.

The Valley of the Worm

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

"He fell through the air full upon the monster's back."

A stirring tale of a hideous monster from the elder world, that came in conflict with the yellow-haired sons of Aryan

I WILL tell you of Niord and the Worm. You have heard the tale before in many guises wherein the hero was named Tyr, or Perseus, or Siegfried, or Beowulf, or Saint George. But it was Niord who met the loathly demoniac thing that crawled hideously up from hell, and from which meeting sprang the cycle of hero-tales that revolves down the ages until the very substance of the truth is lost and passes into the limbo of all forgotten legends. I know whereof I speak, for I was Niord.

As I lie here awaiting death, which

creeps slowly upon me like a blind slug, my dreams are filled with glittering visions and the pageantry of glory. It is not of the drab, disease-racked life of James Allison I dream, but all the gleaming figures of the mighty pageantry that have passed before, and shall come after; for I have faintly glimpsed, not merely the shapes that trail out behind, but shapes that come after, as a man in a long parade glimpses, far ahead, the line of figures that precede him winding over a distant hill, etched shadow-like against the sky. I am one and all the pageantry of shapes and guises and masks which have been, are, and shall be the visible manifestations of that illusive, intangible, but vitally existent spirit now promenading under the brief and temporary name of James Allison.

Each man on earth, each woman, is part and all of a similar caravan of shapes and beings. But they can not remember—their minds can not bridge the brief, awful gulfs of blackness which lie between those unstable shapes, and which the spirit, soul or ego, in spanning, shakes off its fleshy masks. I remember. Why I can remember is the strangest tale of all; but as I lie here with death's black wings slowly unfolding over me, all the dim folds of my previous lives are shaken out before my eyes, and I see myself in many forms and guises—braggart, swaggering, fearful, loving, foolish, all that men have been or will be.

I have been Man in many lands and many conditions; yet—and here is another strange thing—my line of reincarnation runs straight down one unerring channel. I have never been any but a man of that restless race men once called Nordheimr and later Aryans, and today name by many names and designations. Their history is my history, from the first mewling wail of a hairless white ape cub in the wastes of the arctic, to the death-cry of the last degenerate product of ultimate civilization, in some dim and unguessed future age.

My name has been Hialmar, Tyr, Bragi, Bran, Horsa, Eric, and John. I strode red-handed through the deserted streets of Rome behind the yellow-maned Brennus; I wandered through the violated plantations with Alaric and his Goths when the flame of burning villas lit the land like day and an empire was gasping its last under our sandalled feet; I waded sword in hand through the foaming surf from Hengist's galley to lay the foundations of England in blood and pillage; when Leif the Lucky sighted the broad white beaches of an unguessed world, I stood beside him in the bows of the dragon-ship, my golden beard blowing in the wind; and when Godfrey of Bouillon led his Crusaders over the walls of Jerusalem, I was among them in steel cap and brigandine.

But it is of none of these things I would speak. I would take you back with me into an age beside which that of Brennus and Rome is as yesterday. I would take you back through, not merely centuries and millenniums, but epochs and dim ages unguessed by the wildest philosopher. Oh far, far and far will you fare into the nighted Past before you win beyond the boundaries of my race, blue-eyed, yellow-haired, wanderers, slayers, lovers, mighty in rapine and wayfaring.

It is the adventure of Niord Worm's-bane of which I would speak—the root-stem of a whole cycle of hero-tales which has not yet reached its end, the grisly underlying reality that lurks behind time-distorted myths of dragons, fiends and monsters.

Yet it is not alone with the mouth of Niord that I will speak. I am James Allison no less than I was Niord, and as I

unfold the tale, I will interpret some of his thoughts and dreams and deeds from the mouth of the modern I, so that the saga of Niord shall not be a meaningless chaos to you. His blood is your blood, who are sons of Aryan; but wide misty gulfs of eons lie horrifically between, and the deeds and dreams of Niord seem as alien to your deeds and dreams as the primordial and lion-haunted forest seems alien to the white-walled city street.

It was a strange world in which Niord lived and loved and fought, so long ago that even my eon-spanning memory can not recognize landmarks. Since then the surface of the earth has changed, not once but a score of times; continents have risen and sunk, seas have changed their beds and rivers their courses, glaciers have waxed and waned, and the very stars and constellations have altered and shifted.

It was so long ago that the cradle-land of my race was still in Nordheim. But the epic drifts of my people had already begun, and blue-eyed, yellow-maned tribes flowed eastward and southward and westward, on century-long treks that carried them around the world and left their bones and their traces in strange lands and wild waste places. On one of these drifts I grew from infancy to manhood. My knowledge of that northern homeland was dim memories, like half-remembered dreams, of blinding white snow plains and ice fields, of great fires roaring in the circle of hide tents, of yellow manes flying in great winds, and a sun setting in a lurid wallow of crimson clouds, blazing on trampled snow where still dark forms lay in pools that were redder than the sunset.

That last memory stands out clearer than the others. It was the field of Jotunheim, I was told in later years, whereon had just been fought that terrible battle which was the Armageddon of the Æsir-folk, the subject of a cycle of hero-songs for long ages, and which still lives today in dim dreams of Ragnarok and Goetterdaemmerung. I looked on that battle as a mewling infant; so I must have lived about—but I will not name the age, for I would be called a madman, and historians and geologists alike would rise to refute me.

But my memories of Nordheim were few and dim, paled by memories of that long, long trek upon which I had spent my life. We had not kept to a straight course, but our trend had been for ever southward. Sometimes we had bided for a while in fertile upland valleys or rich river-traversed plains, but always we took up the trail again, and not always because of drouth or famine. Often we left countries teeming with game and wild grain to push into wastelands. On our trail we moved endlessly, driven only by our restless whim, yet blindly following a cosmic law, the workings of which we never guessed, any more than the wild geese guess in their flights around the world. So at last we came into the Country of the Worm.

I will take up the tale at the time when we came into jungle-clad hills reeking with rot and teeming with spawning life, where the tom-toms of a savage people pulsed incessantly through the hot breathless night. These people came forth to dispute our way—short, strongly built men, black-haired, painted, ferocious, but indisputably white men. We knew their breed of old. They were Picts, and of all alien races the fiercest. We had met their kind before in thick forests, and in upland valleys beside mountain lakes. But many moons had passed since those meetings.

I believe this particular tribe repre-

sented the easternmost drift of the race. They were the most primitive and ferocious of any I ever met. Already they were exhibiting hints of characteristics I have noted among black savages in jungle countries, though they had dwelt in these environs only a few generations. The abysmal jungle was engulfing them, was obliterating their pristine characteristics and shaping them in its own horrific mold. They were drifting into head-hunting, and cannibalism was but a step which I believe they must have taken before they became extinct. These things are natural adjuncts to the jungle; the Picts did not learn them from the black people, for then there were no blacks among those hills. In later years they came up from the south, and the Picts first enslaved and then were absorbed by them. But with that my saga of Niord is not concerned.

We came into that brutish hill country, with its squalling abysms of savagery and black primitiveness. We were a whole tribe marching on foot, old men, wolfish with their long beards and gaunt limbs, giant warriors in their prime, naked children running along the line of march, women with tousled yellow locks carrying babies which never cried—unless it were to scream from pure rage. I do not remember our numbers, except that there were some five hundred fighting-men—and by fighting-men I mean all males, from the child just strong enough to lift a bow, to the oldest of the old men. In that madly ferocious age all were fighters. Our women fought, when brought to bay, like tigresses, and I have seen a babe, not yet old enough to stammer articulate words, twist its head and sink its tiny teeth in the foot that stamped out its life.

Oh, we were fighters! Let me speak of Niord. I am proud of him, the more when I consider the paltry crippled body of James Allison, the unstable mask I now wear. Niord was tall, with great shoulders, lean hips and mighty limbs. His muscles were long and swelling, denoting endurance and speed as well as strength. He could run all day without tiring, and he possessed a co-ordination that made his movements a blur of blinding speed. If I told you his full strength, you would brand me a liar. But there is no man on earth today strong enough to bend the bow Niord handled with ease. The longest arrow-flight on record is that of a Turkish archer who sent a shaft 482 yards. There was not a stripling in my tribe who could not have bettered that flight.

As we entered the jungle country we heard the tom-toms booming across the mysterious valleys that slumbered between the brutish hills, and in a broad, open plateau we met our enemies. I do not believe these Picts knew us, even by legends, or they had never rushed so openly to the onset, though they outnumbered us. But there was no attempt at ambush. They swarmed out of the trees, dancing and singing their war-songs, yelling their barbarous threats. Our heads should hang in their idol-hut and our yellow-haired women should bear their sons. Ho! ho! ho! By Ymir, it was Niord who laughed then, not James Allison. Just so we of the Æsir laughed to hear their threats—deep thunderous laughter from broad and mighty chests. Our trail was laid in blood and embers through many lands. We were the slayers and ravishers, striding sword in hand across the world, and that these folk threatened us woke our rugged humor.

We went to meet them, naked but for our wolfhides, swinging our bronze swords, and our singing was like rolling thunder in the hills. They sent their arrows among us, and we gave back their

fire. They could not match us in archery. Our arrows hissed in blinding clouds among them, dropping them like autumn leaves, until they howled and frothed like mad dogs and charged to hand-grips. And we, mad with the fighting joy, dropped our bows and ran to meet them, as a lover runs to his love.

By Ymir, it was a battle to madden and make drunken with the slaughter and the fury. The Picts were as ferocious as we, but ours was the superior physique, the keener wit, the more highly developed fighting-brain. We won because we were a superior race, but it was no easy victory. Corpses littered the blood-soaked earth; but at last they broke, and we cut them down as they ran, to the very edge of the trees. I tell of that fight in a few bald words. I can not paint the madness, the reek of sweat and blood, the panting, muscle-straining effort, the splintering of bones under mighty blows, the rending and hewing of quivering sentient flesh; above all the merciless abysmal savagery of the whole affair, in which there was neither rule nor order, each man fighting as he would or could. If I might do so, you would recoil in horror; even the modern I, cognizant of my close kinship with those times, stand aghast as I review that butchery. Mercy was yet unborn, save as some individual's whim, and rules of warfare were as yet undreamed of. It was an age in which each tribe and each human fought tooth and fang from birth to death, and neither gave nor expected mercy.

So we cut down the fleeing Picts, and our women came out on the field to brain the wounded enemies with stones, or cut their throats with copper knives. We did not torture. We were no more cruel than life demanded. The rule of life was ruthlessness, but there is more wanton cruelty today than ever we dreamed of. It was not wanton bloodthirstiness that made us butcher wounded and captive foes. It was because we knew our chances of survival increased with each enemy slain.

Yet there was occasionally a touch of individual mercy, and so it was in this fight. I had been occupied with a duel with an especially valiant enemy. His tousled thatch of black hair scarcely came above my chin, but he was a solid knot of steel-spring muscles, than which lightning scarcely moved faster. He had an iron sword and a hide-covered buckler. I had a knotty-headed bludgeon. That fight was one that glutted even my battle-lusting soul. I was bleeding from a score of flesh wounds before one of my terrible, lashing strokes smashed his shield like cardboard, and an instant later my bludgeon glanced from his unprotected head. Ymir! Even now I stop to laugh and marvel at the hardness of that Pict's skull. Men of that age were assuredly built on a rugged plan! That blow should have spattered his brains like water. It did lay his scalp open horribly, dashing him senseless to the earth, where I let him lie, supposing him to be dead, as I joined in the slaughter of the fleeing warriors.

When I returned reeking with sweat and blood, my club horridly clotted with blood and brains, I noticed that my antagonist was regaining consciousness, and that a naked tousle-headed girl was preparing to give him the finishing touch with a stone she could scarcely lift. A vagrant whim caused me to check the blow. I had enjoyed the fight, and I admired the adamantine quality of his skull.

WE MADE camp a short distance away, burned our dead on a great pyre, and after looting the corpses of the enemy, we dragged them across the plateau and cast them down in a valley to

make a feast for the hyenas, jackals and vultures which were already gathering. We kept close watch that night, but we were not attacked, though far away through the jungle we could make out the red gleam of fires, and could faintly hear, when the wind veered, the throb of tom-toms and demoniac screams and yells—keenings for the slain or mere animal squallings of fury.

Nor did they attack us in the days that followed. We bandaged our captive's wounds and quickly learned his primitive tongue, which, however, was so different from ours that I can not conceive of the two languages having ever had a common source.

His name was Grom, and he was a great hunter and fighter, he boasted. He talked freely and held no grudge, grinning broadly and showing tusk-like teeth, his beady eyes glittering from under the tangled black mane that fell over his low forehead. His limbs were almost ape-like in their thickness.

He was vastly interested in his captors, though he could never understand why he had been spared; to the end it remained an inexplicable mystery to him. The Picts obeyed the law of survival even more rigidly than did the Æsir. They were the more practical, as shown by their more settled habits. They never roamed as far or as blindly as we. Yet in every line we were the superior race.

Grom, impressed by our intelligence and fighting qualities, volunteered to go into the hills and make peace for us with his people. It was immaterial to us, but we let him go. Slavery had not yet been dreamed of.

So Grom went back to his people, and we forgot about him, except that I went a trifle more cautiously about my hunting, expecting him to be lying in wait to put an arrow through my back. Then one day we heard a rattle of tom-toms, and Grom appeared at the edge of the jungle, his face split in his gorilla-grin, with the painted, skin-clad, feather-bedecked chiefs of the clans. Our ferocity had awed them, and our sparing of Grom further impressed them. They could not understand leniency; evidently we valued them too cheaply to bother about killing one when he was in our power.

So peace was made with much pow-wow, and sworn to with many strange oaths and rituals—we swore only by Ymir, and an Æsir never broke that vow. But they swore by the elements, by the idol which sat in the fetish-hut where fires burned for ever and a withered crone slapped a leather-covered drum all night long, and by another being too terrible to be named.

Then we all sat around the fires and gnawed meat-bones, and drank a fiery concoction they brewed from wild grain, and the wonder is that the feast did not end in a general massacre; for that liquor had devils in it and made maggots writhe in our brains. But no harm came of our vast drunkenness, and thereafter we dwelt at peace with our barbarous neighbors. They taught us many things, and learned many more from us. But they taught us iron-workings, into which they had been forced by the lack of copper in those hills, and we quickly excelled them.

We went freely among their villages—mud-walled clusters of huts in hilltop clearings, overshadowed by giant trees—and we allowed them to come at will among our camps—straggling lines of hide tents on the plateau where the battle had been fought. Our young men cared not for their squat beady-eyed women, and our rangy clean-limbed girls with their tousled yellow heads were not drawn to the hairy-breasted savages. Familiarity over a period of years would

have reduced the repulsion on either side, until the two races would have flowed together to form one hybrid people, but long before that time the Æsir rose and departed, vanishing into the mysterious hazes of the haunted south. But before that exodus there came to pass the horror of the Worm.

I HUNTED with Grom and he led me into brooding, uninhabited valleys and up into silence-haunted hills where no men had set foot before us. But there was one valley, off in the mazes of the southwest, into which he would not go. Stumps of shattered columns, relics of a forgotten civilization, stood among the trees on the valley floor. Grom showed them to me, as we stood on the cliffs that flanked the mysterious vale, but he would not go down into it, and he dissuaded me when I would have gone alone. He would not speak plainly of the danger that lurked there, but it was greater than that of serpent or tiger, or the trumpeting elephants which occasionally wandered up in devastating droves from the south.

Of all beasts, Grom told me in the gutturals of his tongue, the Picts feared only Satha, the great snake, and they shunned the jungle where he lived. But there was another thing they feared, and it was connected in some manner with the Valley of Broken Stones, as the Picts called the crumbling pillars. Long ago, when his ancestors had first come into the country, they had dared that grim vale, and a whole clan of them had perished, suddenly, horribly, and unexplainably. At least Grom did not explain. The horror had come up out of the earth, somehow, and it was not good to talk of it, since it was believed that It might be summoned by speaking of It—whatever It was.

But Grom was ready to hunt with me anywhere else; for he was the greatest hunter among the Picts, and many and fearful were our adventures. Once I killed, with the iron sword I had forged with my own hands, that most terrible of all beasts—old saber-tooth, which men today call a tiger because he was more like a tiger than anything else. In reality he was almost as much like a bear in build, save for his unmistakably feline head. Saber-tooth was massive-limbed, with a low-hung, great, heavy body, and he vanished from the earth because he was too terrible a fighter, even for that grim age. As his muscles and ferocity grew, his brain dwindled until at last even the instinct of self-preservation vanished. Nature, who maintains her balance in such things, destroyed him because, had his super-fighting powers been allied with an intelligent brain, he would have destroyed all other forms of life on earth. He was a freak on the road of evolution—organic development gone mad and run to fangs and talons, to slaughter and destruction.

I killed saber-tooth in a battle that would make a saga in itself, and for months afterward I lay semi-delirious with ghastly wounds that made the toughest warriors shake their heads. The Picts said that never before had a man killed a saber-tooth single-handed. Yet I recovered, to the wonder of all.

While I lay at the doors of death there was a secession from the tribe. It was a peaceful secession, such as continually occurred and contributed greatly to the peopling of the world by yellow-haired tribes. Forty-five of the young men took themselves mates simultaneously and wandered off to found a clan of their own. There was no revolt; it was a racial custom which bore fruit in all the later ages, when tribes sprung from the same roots met, after centuries of separation, and cut one another's throats with joyous abandon. The tendency of the Aryan and

the pre-Aryan was always toward disunity, clans splitting off the main stem, and scattering.

So these young men, led by one Bragi, my brother-in-arms, took their girls and venturing to the southwest, took up their abode in the Valley of Broken Stones. The Picts expostulated, hinting vaguely of a monstrous doom that haunted the vale, but the Æsir laughed. We had left our own demons and weirds in the icy wastes of the far blue north, and the devils of other races did not much impress us.

When my full strength was returned, and the grisly wounds were only scars, I girt on my weapons and strode over the plateau to visit Bragi's clan. Grom did not accompany me. He had not been in the Æsir camp for several days. But I knew the way. I remembered well the valley, from the cliffs of which I had looked down and seen the lake at the upper end, the trees thickening into forest at the lower extremity. The sides of the valley were high sheer cliffs, and a steep broad ridge at either end cut it off from the surrounding country. It was toward the lower or southwestern end that the valley-floor was dotted thickly with ruined columns, some towering high among the trees, some fallen into heaps of lichen-clad stones. What race reared them none knew. But Grom had hinted fearsomely of a hairy, apish monstrosity dancing loathsomely under the moon to a demoniac piping that induced horror and madness.

I CROSSED the plateau whereon our camp was pitched, descended the slope, traversed a shallow vegetation-choked valley, climbed another slope, and plunged into the hills. A half-day's leisurely travel brought me to the ridge on the other side of which lay the valley of the pillars. For many miles I had seen no sign of human life. The settlements of the Picts all lay many miles to the east. I topped the ridge and looked down into the dreaming valley with its still blue lake, its brooding cliffs and its broken columns jutting among the trees. I looked for smoke. I saw none, but I saw vultures wheeling in the sky over a cluster of tents on the lake shore.

I came down the ridge warily and approached the silent camp. In it I halted, frozen with horror. I was not easily moved. I had seen death in many forms, and had fled from or taken part in red massacres that spilled blood like water and heaped the earth with corpses. But here I was confronted with an organic devastation that staggered and appalled me. Of Bragi's embryonic clan, not one remained alive, and not one corpse was whole. Some of the hide tents still stood erect. Others were mashed down and flattened out, as if crushed by some monstrous weight, so that at first I wondered if a drove of elephants had stampeded across the camp. But no elephants ever wrought such destruction as I saw strewn on the bloody ground. The camp was a shambles, littered with bits of flesh and fragments of bodies—hands, feet, heads, pieces of human debris. Weapons lay about, some of them stained with a greenish slime like that which spurts from a crushed caterpillar.

No human foe could have committed this ghastly atrocity. I looked at the lake, wondering if nameless amphibian monsters had crawled from the calm waters whose deep blue told of unfathomed depths. Then I saw a print left by the destroyer. It was a track such as a titanic worm might leave, yards broad, winding back down the valley. The grass lay flat where it ran, and bushes and small trees had been crushed down into the earth, all

horribly smeared with blood and greenish slime.

With berserk fury in my soul I drew my sword and started to follow it, when a call attracted me. I wheeled, to see a stocky form approaching me from the ridge. It was Grom the Pict, and when I think of the courage it must have taken for him to have overcome all the instincts planted in him by traditional teachings and personal experience, I realize the full depths of his friendship for me.

Squatting on the lake shore, spear in his hands, his black eyes ever roving fearfully down the brooding tree-waving reaches of the valley, Grom told me of the horror that had come upon Bragi's clan under the moon. But first he told me of it, as his sires had told the tale to him.

Long ago the Picts had drifted down from the northwest on a long, long trek, finally reaching these jungle-covered hills, where, because they were weary, and because the game and fruit were plentiful and there were no hostile tribes, they halted and built their mud-walled villages.

Some of them, a whole clan of that numerous tribe, took up their abode in the Valley of the Broken Stones. They found the columns and a great ruined temple back in the trees, and in that temple there was no shrine or altar, but the mouth of a shaft that vanished deep into the black earth, and in which there were no steps such as a human being would make and use. They built their village in the valley, and in the night, under the moon, horror came upon them and left only broken walls and bits of slime-smeared flesh.

In those days the Picts feared nothing. The warriors of the other clans gathered and sang their war-songs and danced their war-dances, and followed a broad track of blood and slime to the shaft-mouth in the temple. They howled defiance and hurled down boulders which were never heard to strike bottom. Then began a thin demoniac piping, and up from the well pranced a hideous anthropomorphic figure dancing to the weird strains of a pipe it held in its monstrous hands. The horror of its aspect froze the fierce Picts with amazement, and close behind it a vast white bulk heaved up from the subterranean darkness. Out of the shaft came a slavering mad nightmare which arrows pierced but could not check, which swords carved but could not slay. It fell slobbering upon the warriors, crushing them to crimson pulp, tearing them to bits as an octopus might tear small fishes, sucking their blood from their mangled limbs and devouring them even as they screamed and struggled. The survivors fled, pursued to the very ridge, up which, apparently, the monster could not propel its quaking mountainous bulk.

After that they did not dare the silent valley. But the dead came to their shamans and old men in dreams and told them strange and terrible secrets. They spoke of an ancient, ancient race of semi-human beings which once inhabited that valley and reared those columns for their own weird inexplicable purposes. The white monster in the pits was their god, summoned up from the nighted abysses of mid-earth uncounted fathoms below the black mold, by sorcery unknown to the sons of men. The hairy anthropomorphic being was its servant, created to serve the god, a formless elemental spirit drawn up from below and cased in flesh, organic but beyond the understanding of humanity. The Old Ones had long vanished into the limbo from whence they crawled in the black dawn of the universe, but their bestial god and his inhuman slave lived on. Yet both were or-

ganic after a fashion, and could be wounded, though no human weapon had been found potent enough to slay them.

Bragi and his clan had dwelt for weeks in the valley before the horror struck. Only the night before, Grom, hunting above the cliffs, and by that token daring greatly, had been paralyzed by a high-pitched demon piping, and then by a mad clamor of human screaming. Stretched face down in the dirt, hiding his head in a tangle of grass, he had not dared to move, even when the shrieks died away in the slobbering, repulsive sounds of a hideous feast. When dawn broke he had crept shuddering to the cliffs to look down into the valley, and the sight of the devastation, even when seen from afar, had driven him in yammering flight far into the hills. But it had occurred to him, finally, that he should warn the rest of the tribe, and returning, on his way to the camp on the plateau, he had seen me entering the valley.

So spoke Grom, while I sat and brooded darkly, my chin on my mighty fist. I can not frame in modern words the clan-feeling that in those days was a living vital part of every man and woman. In a world where talon and fang were lifted on every hand, and the hands of all men raised against an individual, except those of his own clan, tribal instinct was more than the phrase it is today. It was as much a part of a man as was his heart or his right hand. This was necessary, for only thus banded together in unbreakable groups could mankind have survived in the terrible environments of the primitive world. So now the personal grief I felt for Bragi and the clean-limbed young men and laughing white-skinned girls was drowned in a deeper sea of grief and fury that was cosmic in its depth and intensity. I sat grimly, while the Pict squatted anxiously beside me, his gaze roving from me to the menacing deeps of the valley where the accursed columns loomed like broken teeth of cackling hags among the waving leafy reaches.

I, Niord, was not one to use my brain over-much. I lived in a physical world, and there were the old men of the tribe to do my thinking. But I was one of a race destined to become dominant mentally as well as physically, and I was no mere muscular animal. So as I sat there there came dimly and then clearly a thought to me that brought a short fierce laugh from my lips.

Rising, I bade Grom aid me, and we built a pyre on the lake shore of dried wood, the ridge-poles of the tents, and the broken shafts of spears. Then we collected the grisly fragments that had been parts of Bragi's band, and we laid them on the pile, and struck flint and steel to it.

The thick sad smoke crawled serpent-like into the sky, and turning to Grom, I made him guide me to the jungle where lurked that scaly horror, Satha, the great serpent. Grom gaped at me; not the greatest hunters among the Picts sought out the mighty crawling one. But my will was like a wind that swept him along my course, and at last he led the way. We left the valley by the upper end, crossing the ridge, skirting the tall cliffs, and plunged into the fastnesses of the south, which was peopled only by the grim denizens of the jungle. Deep into the jungle we went, until we came to a low-lying expanse, dank and dark beneath the great creeper-festooned trees, where our feet sank deep into the spongy silt, carpeted by rotting vegetation, and slimy moisture oozed up beneath their pressure. This, Grom told me, was the realm haunted by Satha, the great serpent.

Let me speak of Satha. There is noth-

ing like him on earth today, nor has there been for countless ages. Like the meat-eating dinosaur, like old saber-tooth, he was too terrible to exist. Even then he was a survival of a grimmer age when life and its forms were cruder and more hideous. There were not many of his kind then, though they may have existed in great numbers in the reeking ooze of the vast jungle-tangled swamps still farther south. He was larger than any python of modern ages, and his fangs dripped with poison a thousand times more deadly than that of a king cobra.

He was never worshipped by the pure-blood Picts, though the blacks that came later deified him, and that adoration persisted in the hybrid race that sprang from the negroes and their white conquerors. But to other peoples he was the nadir of evil horror, and tales of him became twisted into demonology; so in later ages Satha became the veritable devil of the white races, and the Stygians first worshipped, and then, when they became Egyptians, abhorred him under the name of Set, the Old Serpent, while to the Semites he became Leviathan and Satan. He was terrible enough to be a god, for he was a crawling death. I had seen a bull elephant fall dead in his tracks from Satha's bite. I had seen him, had glimpsed him writhing his horrific way through the dense jungle, had seen him take his prey, but I had never hunted him. He was too grim, even for the slayer of old saber-tooth.

But now I hunted him, plunging farther and farther into the hot, breathless reek of his jungle, even when friendship for me could not drive Grom farther. He urged me to paint my body and sing my death-song before I advanced farther, but I pushed on unheeding.

In a natural runway that wound between the shouldering trees, I set a trap. I found a large tree, soft and spongy of fiber, but thick-boled and heavy, and I hacked through its base close to the ground with my great sword, directing its fall so that when it toppled, its top crashed into the branches of a smaller tree, leaving it leaning across the runway, one end resting on the earth, the other caught in the small tree. Then I cut away the branches on the under side, and cutting a slim tough sapling I trimmed it and stuck it upright like a prop-pole under the leaning tree. Then, cutting away the tree which supported it, I left the great trunk poised precariously on the prop-pole, to which I fastened a long vine, as thick as my wrist.

Then I went alone through that primordial twilight jungle until an overpowering fetid odor assailed my nostrils, and from the rank vegetation in front of me, Satha reared up his hideous head, swaying lethally from side to side, while his forked tongue jetted in and out, and his great yellow terrible eyes burned icily on me with all the evil wisdom of the black elder world that was when man was not. I backed away, feeling no fear, only an icy sensation along my spine, and Satha came sinuously after me, his shining eighty-foot barrel rippling over the rotting vegetation in mesmeric silence. His wedge-shaped head was bigger than the head of the hugest stallion, his trunk was thicker than a man's body, and his scales shimmered with a thousand changing scintillations. I was to Satha as a mouse is to a king cobra, but I was fang as no mouse ever was. Quick as I was, I knew I could not avoid the lightning stroke of that great triangular head; so I dared not let him come too close. Subtly I fled down the runway, and behind me the rush of the great supple body was like the sweep of wind through the grass.

He was not far behind me when I

raced beneath the dead-fall, and as the great shining length glided under the trap, I gripped the vine with both hands and jerked desperately. With a crash the great trunk fell across Satha's scaly back, some six feet back of his wedge-shaped head.

I had hoped to break his spine but I do not think it did, for the great body coiled and knotted, the mighty tail lashed and thrashed, mowing down the bushes as if with a giant flail. At the instant of the fall, the huge head had whipped about and struck the tree with a terrific impact, the mighty fangs shearing through bark and wood like simitars. Now, as if aware he fought an inanimate foe, Satha turned on me, standing out of his reach. The scaly neck writhed and arched, the mighty jaws gaped, disclosing fangs a foot in length, from which dripped venom that might have burned through solid stone.

I believe, what of his stupendous strength, that Satha would have writhed from under the trunk, but for a broken branch that had been driven deep into his side, holding him like a barb. The sound of his hissing filled the jungle and his eyes glared at me with such concentrated evil that I shook despite myself. Oh, he knew it was I who had trapped him! Now I came as close as I dared, and with a sudden powerful cast of my spear, transfixed his neck just below the gaping jaws, nailing him to the tree-trunk. Then I dared greatly, for he was far from dead, and I knew he would in an instant tear the spear from the wood and be free to strike. But in that instant I ran in, and swinging my sword with all my great power, I hewed off his terrible head.

THE heavings and contortions of Satha's prisoned form in life were naught to the convulsions of his headless length in death. I retreated, dragging the gigantic head after me with a crooked pole, and at a safe distance from the lashing, flying tail, I set to work. I worked with naked death then, and no man ever toiled more gingerly than did I. For I cut out the poison sacs at the base of the great fangs, and in the terrible venom I soaked the heads of eleven arrows, being careful that only the bronze points were in the liquid, which else had corroded away the wood of the tough shafts. While I was doing this, Grom, driven by comradeship and curiosity, came stealing nervously through the jungle, and his mouth gaped as he looked on the head of Satha.

For hours I steeped the arrowheads in the poison, until they were caked with a horrible green scum, and showed tiny flecks of corrosion where the venom had eaten into the solid bronze. I wrapped them carefully in broad, thick, rubber-like leaves, and then, though night had fallen and the hunting beasts were roaring on every hand, I went back through the jungled hills, Grom with me, until at dawn we came again to the high cliffs that loomed above the Valley of Broken Stones.

At the mouth of the valley I broke my spear, and I took all the unpoisoned shafts from my quiver, and snapped them. I painted my face and limbs as the Æsir painted themselves only when they went forth to certain doom, and I sang my death-song to the sun as it rose over the cliffs, my yellow mane blowing in the morning wind.

Then I went down into the valley, bow in hand.

Grom could not drive himself to follow me. He lay on his belly in the dust and howled like a dying dog.

I passed the lake and the silent camp where the pyre-ashes still smoldered, and came under the thickening trees beyond. About me the columns loomed, mere

shapeless heaps from the ravages of staggering eons. The trees grew more dense, and under their vast leafy branches the very light was dusky and evil. As in twilight shadow I saw the ruined temple, cyclopean walls staggering up from masses of decaying masonry and fallen blocks of stone. About six hundred yards in front of it a great column reared up in an open glade, eighty or ninety feet in height. It was so worn and pitted by weather and time that any child of my tribe could have climbed it, and I marked it and changed my plan.

I came to the ruins and saw huge crumbling walls upholding a domed roof from which many stones had fallen, so that it seemed like the lichen-grown ribs of some mythical monster's skeleton arching above me. Titanic columns flanked the open doorway through which ten elephants could have stalked abreast. Once there might have been inscriptions and heiroglyphics on the pillars and walls, but they were long worn away. Around the great room, on the inner side, ran columns in better state of preservation. On each of these columns was a flat pedestal, and some dim instinctive memory vaguely resurrected a shadowy scene wherein black drums roared madly, and on these pedestals monstrous beings squatted loathsomely in inexplicable rituals rooted in the black dawn of the universe.

There was no altar—only the mouth of a great well-like shaft in the stone floor, with strange obscene carvings all about the rim. I tore great pieces of stone from the rotting floor and cast them down the shaft which slanted down into utter darkness. I heard them bound along the side, but I did not hear them strike bottom. I cast down stone after stone, each with a searing curse, and at last I heard a sound that was not the dwindling rumble of the falling stones. Up from the well floated a weird demon-piping that was a symphony of madness. Far down in the darkness I glimpsed the faint fearful glimmering of a vast white bulk.

I retreated slowly as the piping grew louder, falling back through the broad doorway. I heard a scratching, scrambling noise, and up from the shaft and out of the doorway between the colossal columns came a prancing incredible figure. It went erect like a man, but it was covered with fur, that was shaggiest where its face should have been. If it had ears, nose and a mouth I did not discover them. Only a pair of staring red eyes leered from the furry mask. Its misshapen hands held a strange set of pipes, on which it blew weirdly as it pranced toward me with many a grotesque caper and leap.

Behind it I heard a repulsive obscene noise as of a quaking unstable mass heaving up out of a well. Then I nocked an arrow, drew the cord and sent the shaft singing through the furry breast of the dancing monstrosity. It went down as though struck by a thunderbolt, but to my horror the piping continued, though the pipes had fallen from the malformed hands. Then I turned and ran fleetly to the column, up which I swarmed before I looked back. When I reached the pinnacle I looked, and because of the shock and surprize of what I saw, I almost fell from my dizzy perch.

Out of the temple the monstrous dweller in the darkness had come, and I, who had expected a horror yet cast in some terrestrial mold, looked on the spawn of nightmare. From what subterranean hell it crawled in the long ago I know not, nor what black age it represented. But it was not a beast, as humanity knows beasts. I call it a worm for lack of a better term. There is no earthly language which has a name for it. I can only say that it looked somewhat more like a worm

than it did an octopus, a serpent or a dinosaur.

It was white and pulpy, and drew its quaking bulk along the ground, worm-fashion. But it had wide flat tentacles, and fleshy feelers, and other adjuncts the use of which I am unable to explain. And it had a long proboscis which it curled and uncurled like an elephant's trunk. Its forty eyes, set in a horrific circle, were composed of thousands of facets of as many scintillant colors which changed and altered in never-ending transmutation. But through all interplay of hue and glint, they retained their evil intelligence—intelligence there was behind those flickering facets, not human nor yet bestial, but a night-born demoniac intelligence such as men in dreams vaguely sense throbbing titanically in the black gulfs outside our material universe. In size the monster was mountainous; its bulk would have dwarfed a mastodon.

But even as I shook with the cosmic horror of the thing, I drew a feathered shaft to my ear and arched it singing on its way. Grass and bushes were crushed flat as the monster came toward me like a moving mountain and shaft after shaft I sent with terrific force and deadly precision. I could not miss so huge a target. The arrows sank to the feathers or clear out of sight in the unstable bulk, each bearing enough poison to have stricken dead a bull elephant. Yet on it came, swiftly, appallingly, apparently heedless of both the shafts and the venom in which they were steeped. And all the time the hideous music played a maddening accompaniment, whining thinly from the pipes that lay untouched on the ground.

My confidence faded; even the poison of Satha was futile against this uncanny being. I drove my last shaft almost straight downward into the quaking white mountain, so close was the monster under my perch. Then suddenly its color altered. A wave of ghastly blue surged over it, and the vast bulk heaved in earthquake-like convulsions. With a terrible plunge it struck the lower part of the column, which crashed to falling shards of stone. But even with the impact, I leaped far out and fell through the empty air full upon the monster's back.

The spongy skin yielded and gave beneath my feet, and I drove my sword hilt-deep, dragging it through the pulpy flesh, ripping a horrible yard-long wound, from which oozed a green slime. Then a flip of a cable-like tentacle flicked me from the titan's back and spun me three hundred feet through the air to crash among a cluster of giant trees.

The impact must have splintered half the bones in my frame, for when I sought to grasp my sword again and crawl anew to the combat, I could not move hand or foot, could only writhe helplessly with my broken back. But I could see the monster and I knew that I had won, even in defeat. The mountainous bulk was heaving and billowing, the tentacles were lashing madly, the antennæ writhing and knotting, and the nauseous whiteness had changed to a pale and grisly green. It turned ponderously and lurched back toward the temple, rolling like a crippled ship in a heavy swell. Trees crashed and splintered as it lumbered against them.

I wept with pure fury because I could not catch up my sword and rush in to die glutting my berserk madness in mighty strokes. But the worm-god was death-stricken and needed not my futile sword. The demon pipes on the ground kept up their infernal tune, and it was like the fiend's death-dirge. Then as the monster veered and floundered, I saw it catch up the corpse of its hairy slave. For an instant the apish form dangled in midair,

gripped round by the trunk-like proboscis, then was dashed against the temple wall with a force that reduced the hairy body to a mere shapeless pulp. At that the pipes screamed out horribly, and fell silent for ever.

The titan staggered on the brink of the shaft; then another change came over it—a frightful transfiguration the nature of which I can not yet describe. Even now when I try to think of it clearly, I am only chaotically conscious of a blasphemous, unnatural transmutation of form and substance, shocking and indescribable. Then the strangely altered bulk tumbled into the shaft to roll down into the ultimate darkness from whence it came, and I knew that it was dead. And as it vanished into the well, with a rending, grinding groan the ruined walls quivered from dome to base. They bent inward and buckled with deafening reverberation, the columns splintered, and with a cataclysmic crash the dome itself came thundering down. For an instant the air seemed veiled with flying debris and stone-dust, through which the treetops lashed madly as in a storm or an earthquake convulsion. Then all was clear again and I stared, shaking the blood from my eyes. Where the temple had stood there lay only a colossal pile of shattered masonry and broken stones, and every column in the valley had fallen, to lie in crumbling shards.

In the silence that followed I heard Grom wailing a dirge over me. I bade him lay my sword in my hand, and he did so, and bent close to hear what I had to say, for I was passing swiftly.

"Let my tribe remember," I said, speaking slowly. "Let the tale be told from village to village, from camp to camp, from tribe to tribe, so that men may know that not man nor beast nor devil may prey in safety on the golden-haired people of Asgard. Let them build me a cairn where I lie and lay me therein with my bow and sword at hand, to guard this valley for ever; so if the ghost of the god I slew comes up from below, my ghost will ever be ready to give it battle."

And while Grom howled and beat his hairy breast, death came to me in the Valley of the Worm.

Tarbis of the Lake

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

Tarbis was a living, breathing woman with a living woman's passion—
but what was the thing that lay in the mummy-case
like a corpse within its coffin?

"MY SON," said white-haired Father Peytral to his companion, whose steel-gray eyes seemed far older than his rugged, bronzed features, "suppose that you abandon this hypothetical *friend* of yours and tell me what is worrying *you*. Never mind what I'll think. Just express yourself."

John Rankin started. His face darkened for an instant; then he smiled as he caught the kindly expression in the old priest's eyes.

"I might have known you'd see through it, Father Peytral. But before I go any further, tell me who—what—well, *was* there ever a woman named Tarbis? I mean, other than——"

Rankin abruptly checked his speech, stared at the earth and at the heels of the unending throng of pilgrims who passed along the Esplanade.

Father Peytral's scrutiny of Rankin became keener at the mention of Tarbis.

"What's that?" he demanded. *"Tarbis?"* The priest frowned as he groped for a moment for a thought that was evading him, then resumed, "There is an old tradition to the effect that Tarbis, Queen of Ethiopia——"

"Ethiopia?" interrupted Rankin. "Why—*she* is as white as I am."

Father Peytral's eyebrows rose. Then, instead of asking the question that was on his lips, he explained, "Ethiopia in those days was the upper kingdom of Egypt. A queen of that country was no more negro than Rameses the Great.

"And this Tarbis," he continued, "offered her hand and crown to Moses, who declined both. The pride of the queen and the woman being sorely wounded, she abandoned her throne and set sail, wandering until she reached France. She founded not only the city of Tarbes, which to this day bears her name, but also its neighbor, Lapurdum—our modern Lourdes which God has so signally honored in selecting it as the place for the apparition of the Holy Virgin to appear.

"They say that the site of the original Lapurdum was three kilometers from here. Its inhabitants practised black magic. The place became a den of necromancers, an affront to God, man, and nature. But instead of following the Scriptural precedent, and destroying Lapurdum with fire, the Almighty caused a flood to rise out of the earth and overwhelm the city, whence the present lake, not far from the outskirts of the modern city of Lourdes.

"All of which," concluded Father Peytral, "is to be found in the archives of Lourdes."

"Good God!" muttered Rankin. "Worse and worse! You've just succeeded in confirming my outrageous fancy—the thing I've tried to deny. . . ."

Rankin suddenly sat bolt-upright. His bronzed cheeks had become a sickly yellow. His eyes were burning with an unnatural light, and his face was drawn and haggard as he regarded the priest for a moment before continuing, "That Ethiopian queen never died. *She is living in*

"She was one flight below and centuries away."

Lourdes, on the street that leads to the château. I knew—I sensed—and now you have confirmed it!"

Father Peytral recognized solemn-voiced knowledge.

"My son," he said in a low, even voice, "that any human being, man or woman, could attain everlasting physical life is denied both by the Church and by science. Whatever the source of your obsession, you must forget such fantastic thoughts!"

"Forget them?" exclaimed Rankin.

"I've tried that for several years. You've often tried to get me to open up. I evaded your queries, but my fear finally got the best of me. First it was a lover's fancy, that idea that Tarbis Dulac had in the dim past discovered the secret of eternal youth. That didn't alarm me. It was just a quaint conceit, a whimsical fancy about a girl I think a great deal of. But at last I found that I was telling myself that I didn't believe anything of the kind."

"Which," said the priest, "assured you that you did believe just that, and it frightened you."

Rankin nodded.

"So I left Lourdes. I roamed all over Asia, trying to forget. And when I finally succeeded in driving her antique smile from my conscious memory, and with it the idea that she was some one who had lived for ages, she returned and haunted me in nightmarish dreams. She made statuesque gestures, like—you've seen them, sculptured——"

"Mais oui," agreed Father Peytral. "In the Louvre, for instance."

"She wore a tall, curious head-dress. She murmured words that I could not understand, except in momentary flashes. And what I understood troubled me more than what I didn't. I'm afraid of Tarbis—and I'm incurably in love with her."

HE RAISED his eyes and made a despairing gesture of his hand, then let his head droop wearily. Father Peytral murmured to himself as he contemplated the hopelessly baffled expression of Rankin's rugged features.

"And now you tell me a legend of a Tarbis who was a queen, Lord knows how many centuries ago," muttered Rankin. "And of the lake—her very name today, Dulac . . . *du Lac* . . ." Then, jerking himself erect: "What do you say? Am I utterly insane?"

"No," replied the priest as he grasped Rankin by the shoulder. "On the contrary, your doubts prove your sanity. An insane person is assured that every one but himself is unbalanced. Your denying this delusion is your best assurance."

"Well, what am I to do?" demanded Rankin, taking heart. "I can't stand being near a woman who I *know* is an uncanny creature that should have died ages ago. And neither can I stay away from her. I've tried both!"

For a moment neither spoke. Then Father Peytral's frown of perplexed pondering was replaced by a smile of calm assurance.

"You have unwittingly taken the right course," he said, "in speaking your thought aloud instead of letting it be an inner murmuring that has poisoned your mind. Seek this Tarbis Dulac, look her in the eye, speak to her and tell her your thought. Never mind what she thinks of your sanity. Face her unflinchingly and express yourself. Ask her solemnly who and what she is, and tell her why you ask. If she cares for you, she will not be harsh in her judgment."

"Father Peytral, I can't do that!" protested Rankin. "She'll think——" He regarded the priest with outraged amazement. "You seem to forget——"

Father Peytral shook his gray head. His smile was a tale of time-mellowed grief.

"My son," he said in a voice that was none the less authoritative for being low, "I do not forget. *I know.* If she cares for you, she will not judge harshly. And once you have enunciated this outrageous thought, you will have conquered it. Your fear and your furtive denials have fostered this obsession, even as your speaking boldly will burn it out."

Rankin pondered for a moment. He rose from the stone bench and stood erect.

His eyes were less haggard, and his drawn face had relaxed.

"Thank you, Father," he said. "I'll see her tonight, and I'll follow your advice."

Rankin lifted his hat and bowed. Then, to himself, as he strode down the Esplanade, "Fine old man . . . not a sign of a sermon . . . seems perfectly natural to call him *Father*. . . ."

Like those pilgrims who flock toward Lourdes, Rankin had crossed land and sea for the good of his soul, even though he had not come to pray, or to drink the water of the spring that had miraculously burst forth from the grotto of the great black rock of Massabielle. But, though Father Peytral's assurance gave Rankin a new grip on himself, and a weapon with which to combat his obsession, the good priest's words had at the same time strengthened Rankin's ever-present feeling that he was dealing with one whose name was written on the first pages of the archives of that city which had not always been a holy place, comparable to Rome, Jerusalem, or Mekka.

THAT evening Rankin sat once more in the luxuriously furnished reception room of that outwardly unprepossessing house which was perched on the steep slope of the hill whose high-walled fortress and square donjon built by the Moslem conquerors commanded the valley of the Gave.

"It is good to see you again, *mon ami*," she said as she regarded Rankin with her smoldering, long-lashed eyes. "Incurable nomad, you tried to forget Tarbis, didn't you?"

"But I couldn't," Rankin admitted somberly. The assurance that he had gained from Father Peytral was slowly melting before the loveliness of Tarbis Dulac. "And I know now that I never shall. You've haunted me. Your memory followed me and made a madness of my dreams. So I've returned."

"I knew that you would, some day," murmured the girl. "I've been expecting you."

She smiled that slow, archaic smile that had haunted Rankin; but her eyes were dolorous and incredibly ancient. They contradicted the youthful freshness of her skin and the gracious contours of her throat and shoulders. Tarbis was uncommonly lovely, and any one but Rankin would have accepted her without undue wonderings and fancies.

Then Rankin nerved himself for the assault.

"I've returned to solve the riddle," said Rankin. "You've evaded me and mocked me with that sphinx smile of yours, and your eyes have laughed at me. I've wondered entirely too long who and what you are. So I've returned to find out, once for all," he concluded.

The girl's eyebrows rose in Moorish arches, and she made a fleeting gesture of her slender hand. That damnable, haunting gesture! That insidious suggestion of sculptured figures on the unhallowed granite of deserted temples and rifled tombs!

"Insatiable, aren't you?" she chided. "What more do you want? What have I ever denied you?"

Tarbis was right. Any sane man should have been content. Yet there was that same evasion which had always left Rankin baffled. Rankin knew that he had flinched from the assault; that he had failed solemnly to demand who and what she was.

"Tarbis, how old are you?" he asked in blunt-spoken desperation.

"Such a question, *mon ami!*" Her laugh was light. She refused to take him seriously. Then she answered, "I'm ever so much older than you suspect, John.

But would I be any more pleasing if you could catalogue me like a piece of antique furniture, a bit of jade, a Persian carpet?"

Rankin had to admit that Tarbis was right. And to consider her as a normal woman was the sane and logical thing; yet there would be no peace until she had answered the solemn adjuration he was to make.

"I wonder," she continued, "if you are sure that you want to know. Did you ever stop to think that you might have long regrets?"

Worse and yet worse! She was hinting at the very thought that he had sought to disown.

"You know," said Tarbis after a long pause during which her lips were alternately smiling and grave, "I could just as well question you, and wonder why you've left me several times, with never a quarrel or any apparent necessity. And I do know that you've always cared for me—a great deal. There is nothing to prevent your staying in Lourdes. You know I'd not seek any claim on you. Yet you've always left."

"Yes, and always returned!" he retorted, stung by the memory of his resolutions to forget her, and his inevitable relapse from his determination. "But this time I'm going to get the answer. You're so much more than you appear to be. You're not one woman but a world of women in one, and you are withholding a hundredfold more than you'll ever reveal."

"Such versatility should be pleasing," suggested Tarbis with a lightness that belied her unsmiling eyes.

Rankin decided that she was not mocking him, but he would no longer accept evasion. He rose abruptly and seized her by the wrist.

"Let's not fence any longer! Just because I've not found words to express myself——"

Rankin stopped short. He had found words, but he dared not use them.

"Then tell me what is on your mind, John," said Tarbis. "Maybe I'll understand."

She spoke very solemnly now. Her voice was grave, and her eyes were unsmiling and age-old. Rankin released her wrist and stared at the golden-olive tint that crept back to erase the white imprint of his grasp. She regarded him intently for a long moment, then spoke again.

"Can't you forget your morbid curiosity?" she pleaded. "Can't you take me for what I am, and without question? Kiss me, and love me for the sake of the evening, and for myself. And if you do care enough to be jealous, stay here in Lourdes, always, and watch me as closely as any Turk ever guarded his harem."

RANKIN saw the gleam of tears in her great lustrous eyes. He knew that he was about to weaken as he had so many times before. At the moment, his thoughts seemed outrageous and insane beyond expression. And then he thought of the obsession that had overwhelmed him and affronted every trace of reason. No matter what she thought of his sanity, he had to declare himself. It would be better for her to think him utterly mad than for him to become so in fact. He nerved himself for the final plunge.

"Tarbis, do you know that most of the time I've been resisting the thought that you are not a woman at all, but *something*——"

"Must you know *all* about me?" she interrupted, recoiling from the implication of his last word, and eager to prevent his expressing that which she sensed would follow. "John, can't you take

anything for granted? Have I ever——"

"No, I can't," declared Rankin, evading her attempted change of subject. "I've reached the verge of madness, telling myself, arguing with myself to prove that you are not older than any woman has a right to be. In my own mind I've denied breaths of rumors and hints that no rational person would bother to deny."

"Oh, those damnable, meddling priests and villagers!" exclaimed Tarbis with a despairing, impersonal bitterness. "Can't they live and let live? Can't they be content to go their placid, ordained ways and leave me in peace?"

"But they didn't talk about you," protested Rankin.

"No, but they spoke of *her*," countered Tarbis. "John, can't you forget all this? You do care for me, don't you? Or am I just another riddle that your insatiable mind must solve lest it perish of unsatisfied vanity? Must you know everything?"

"Not everything, Tarbis. But this one thing, yes; for the good of my soul and my sanity. Who and what are you?" he demanded desperately, steeling himself to resist the appeal that he read in her eyes.

She was about to yield. He could not now relent.

"Since you insist, I'll tell you," she finally assented. "No, I'll show you, and let you draw your own conclusion. I will let you meet my rival face to face."

"*Your* rival?" gasped Rankin, amazed at that turn. "You mean *my* rival, don't you?"

"No, I mean what I said: *my* rival," affirmed Tarbis. "My rival, and my damnation. She will drive you away. She will everlastingly destroy the happiness I have stolen—we have stolen. But since it must be——"

She took Rankin by the hand, and half turned toward the winding stairway. Then she paused and reached for her wine-glass, which glowed like a satanic ruby in the light of the candelabrum on the table.

"A toast, John," she proposed, with the air of one gallantly drinking to an impending doom. "To my rival and to her damnation!"

Rankin drained his glass. Tarbis barely moistened her lips, and set the stemmed glass back on the old lace runner that crossed the table. Then she led the way upstairs.

As Rankin passed the great carved newel post and followed her up through the dim light, it seemed that he was marching toward a perilous rendezvous. For a moment he wanted to take the steps three at a bound, seize her and carry her back to the warmth and light of that familiar living-room, to fight those torturing fancies on the level ground of sanity. But Rankin remembered his resolve, and stifled the sadness that was mingled with his sense of impending peril.

Tarbis halted at the head of the stairs. Her blue-black hair glistened under the glow of a shaded oil lamp. Queer, how this luxurious house of hers should be so obsolete in some details. The great square-cut emerald on her finger was phosphorescent as the eyes of a beast of prey. Rankin knew why he observed and made mental comment on such irrelevancies . . . once, in crossing a courtyard to face a firing-squad, he had noted the pattern of the tiles and had observed that the color scheme was clashing. . . .

"She is waiting for us," he heard Tarbis saying. "Here, in my own room."

Rankin fought the raging impulse to retreat and let well enough alone. He followed her into the dimness of that familiar room with its great canopied bed

and its dressing-table. A massive hand-mirror lay, as always, face down, the twining golden serpents of its handle gleaming ominously in the faint light. Rankin wondered again why that mirror was never face up.

Then, in a niche in the masonry of the wall he saw a mummy-case whose gilded features stared vacantly at him.

"She is here," said Tarbis. "I will leave you with her. Her last words were spoken far back in the first youth of time. Her lips are silent, but she will speak to your mind. And when you *know,* you may return to the living-room. I'll probably be asleep on the divan."

She paused and regarded him intently for a moment; then she continued, "Perhaps, when she tells you who I am, and how old I am, you'll pass quietly on, without even a word of farewell. But, perhaps—the memories we share—I hope——"

She turned, without expressing her hope. The door closed behind her, leaving Rankin with his strange companion. The loneliness of the room oppressed him. The departure of Tarbis made it appallingly like a tomb.

He felt in his vest pocket for cigarettes, but found none. Well, no matter; although a smoke would be company while he sat there, seeking the point of the tableau she had arranged. Then he saw a silver case among the combs and perfume vials and powder boxes. It was half filled with long, slender cigarettes. He struck light to one. It was ever so faintly scented and had a curious but not unpleasant aroma. That exotic tobacco was appropriate to Tarbis. Rankin snapped his lighter closed and leaned back in his shair to contemplate the gilded features of the sycamore case and its rows of painted hieroglyphs.

THROUGH the gray wisps of smoke he regarded the gilded mask, at first idly, then with an intentness that he sought to deny to himself. Something new was stirring disquietingly in his mind. He forced himself to think of Tarbis whose slender length was now stretched out on the Shemaka rug that covered the divan. Tarbis du Lac . . . Tarbis of the Lake . . . asleep or awake, she would be smiling in whimsical mockery of her latest lover.

Even though she had never once hinted that he had any predecessors in her affections, though she had never indulged in that mania for boasting that goes disguised as candid confession, Rankin knew that Tarbis must have had many lovers before him. He knew that she must have learned ever so long ago that illusion is more alluring than candor.

And this thought slowly but certainly brought his consciousness back to the gilded face before him. The convictions that had haunted him so long became stronger than ever before. Had the occupant of that sycamore case lived until today, she too would have learned from experience that no lover cares for candor about his predecessors. *Had she lived*——

Then Rankin surrendered to a new madness which was more perturbing than that which he had sought to conquer that evening. It was terrifying. He shivered and sat erect in his chair. The scented poison of the cigarette curled unheeded around his fingers and stained them.

If the carver had given life and animation to those long almond-shaped eyes, they would be the eyes of Tarbis. A slow, damning madness corroded Rankin. The fire of the cigarette ate into his fingers and momentarily broke the spell. He ground the butt into the rug beneath his feet and struck light to

another smoke. But the distraction was not enough to stop the surge of surmise that had become knowledge. That curved, antique smile of gilt was Tarbis herself staring at him, mocking the wooden conventions of Egyptian carving and fighting through the gold leaf into faithful portraiture.

He knew now what Tarbis had intended to convey to him. He had been haunted by the outlandish idea that Tarbis, ages ago, had discovered the secret of everlasting youth. Rankin had considered such a fancy outrageous, and any woman who inspired the like, uncanny. But now——

Tarbis had become something infinitely more terrifying: she was not one who had, ages ago, discovered the secret of eternal youth, but rather the product of an Egyptian magic which had enabled dead Tarbis to materialize and present the semblance of a physical woman.

Rankin clutched the arms of his chair. A searing fire blazed in his brain. Every memory of Tarbis and her amorous encircling arms denied the terrific conviction carried by that gilded smile; yet as he stared at that gilded mask, Rankin began to remember things which he wished that he had never learned. To distract himself from the fancy that Tarbis was age-old, he had listened to adepts in High Asia, who muttered of Tibetan lore, and the lost magic of Egypt, never suspecting that he was acquiring a knowledge that would in the end be more horrible than the whim he sought to cast out.

He wondered when she emerged from the painted case with its painted hieroglyphs. He wondered what she had done with her endless yards of linen bandages, and how she had escaped their firm embrace. Then, bit by bit, there came back to Rankin the words of that slant-eyed adept he had befriended.

"There are nine elements which when fused into a unit make what your eye sees as a single human body: the physical, flesh-and-blood body; the shadow; the double, or astral counterpart called the *ka;* the soul, or *ba;* the heart; a spirit called *khu;* a Power; a Name; and a ninth component which is a motivating force. . . . And all these, mark you, are used in a mystical, or esoteric sense. Yet this knowledge if truly interpreted and rightly used can serve to work all the wonders of the hidden Egyptian magic that was codified by Thoth. . . ."

The embalmed physical body of Tarbis was in the case before Rankin; and that which had seemed to him to be a living woman was but an aggregation of elements that had joined the *ka*, which lingers near the physical body until it utterly disintegrates.

Every whimsical speech and mannerism of Tarbis came trooping back to confirm Rankin's dismaying conviction. His brain reeled at the recollection of her avoidance of daylight.

"My dear," she had murmured one evening, "you sit up to the most unusual hours making love to me—oh, ever so charmingly!—and then you marvel that I'd rather not spend the following day strolling along the Esplanade, or scaling Pic de Jer. And it's one of my pet vanities, *tu comprends,* this being seen only at my best, at night, by my own lighting. . . ."

It was clear, now. That ancient necromancy had not been able to restore the missing *shadow*, so that Tarbis could not appear by the shadow-casting sun. The Name, the Power, the *ka* . . . perhaps all but the one missing and irreplaceable element were present.

Then Rankin's sanity revolted. He fought the urge to wrench the lid from the sycamore case. He dared not yield

to the demand to find out what was behind that gilded, smiling mask. If indeed it was empty, that would mean that that dead, bandage-swathed thing emerged from its cell to offer him the unholy semblance of a living woman.

Rankin shivered as though a breath of the abysmal outer spaces had been exhaled into his veins and was chilling his blood.

"It can't be empty!" his mind screamed to his *self*. "Good God, if it's empty——!"

He dared not complete the utterance. He refused to think of the slender, shapely arms of Tarbis and her curved, carmine smile.

"But if *it* is in there, then she's an illusion—a shadow from the tomb. That is as bad—or is it worse?"

RANKIN forced his brain to cease that insistent surging that would end by cracking his skull. The veins in his temples would in another moment burst like rotted fire-hose.

Then the strokes of the cathedral bell mercifully interrupted the dread that he could neither accept nor deny. And during the moment of respite accorded him by that sound from the outer world, he noted for the first time the possible significance of the peculiar aroma of the cigarettes Tarbis had left in her case. It was reminiscent of something they smoked in Persia and Hindustan.

He smiled at the gilded mask. The last rich note of the cathedral bell reminded him that Lourdes was a holy city. He envied the calm priests and the pious pilgrims, and was glad that they were there, not far from the foot of the hill.

"Tarbis, you devil, and your cigarettes!" he exulted, gratefully ascribing his dreadful fancies to the influence of *charras*, or whatever other like drug they might have contained thus to upset his mind. He sighed with relief and weariness. "But maybe I deserve it."

He rose and found that he still trembled violently. His legs barely supported his weight; but his brain no longer rocked and quivered from clamorings from beyond the Border.

Tarbis would be waiting for him in the living-room. She would see the mark of terror still branding his features. But he forgave her the ghastly jest. He could be generous, now that he had conquered his obsession by expressing it in words. He had asked her: and she had answered by showing him in her oblique way that there were fancies infinitely more disturbing than that of her possessing everlasting youth. Only Tarbis could have devised such an answer: slender, alluring Tarbis, curled up on the Shemaka rug.

But as he reached the door, a lurking residue of the evening's horror returned to remind him that his conquest had not been complete. He knew that in the end he would begin to wonder anew whether that case was or was not empty, and whether Tarbis was a revenant imprisoned by day, but loose at night to fascinate him with her archaic, Egyptian smile. And Rankin's dreadful surmises marched once more in a damning circle that was started afresh by his glance of premature triumph at that gilded mask. That subtle, gilded smile! That hint of a hidden jest!

He retraced his steps. With an effort he grasped the cover. And then he slowly withdrew his hands. He knew that his sanity demanded that he refrain from giving any physical expression to that question. But, as he was about to step back, he knew what would become of his regained reason if he retreated without having learned, for ever and always, what the case contained, whose names and

titles were depicted in painted hieroglyphs upon that carven sycamore.

Rankin thrust the cover aside. And then he tore the crumbling linen bandages that swathed the features of the dead. He had ceased thinking; he had nerved himself to the task and he could not stop. His mind was dead, but his fingers lived. They tore another layer of bandages, and another.

Something forced him to look at that face. A blind instinct and a compelling terror urged him to learn the truth, whatever it might be. The dust of centuries mingled with the dust of crumbled linen and pungent spices and choked him. Then he stepped back and regarded the shrunken, hideously life-like features. The gilded mask had been a portrait; *but here he faced Tarbis herself!*

He gasped for breath. He sought to deny his eyes, refute the evidence of his senses, prove that he had not felt the burning ardor of those shrivelled lips. This was the supreme horror, the uttermost outrage.

Rankin forced his eyes at last to leave that terrible mockery of the loveliness of Tarbis. And then he saw what was worse: the final link in the evidence that bound Tarbis to that which had lived and died, ages ago. On the now exposed breast of the mummy he could with fatal clearness see a knife scar: that same scar that marred the perfection of the living Tarbis—or the one that he had thought was living.

Rankin was bereft of all sensation but a terrific whirring in his ears and a diabolical drumming and thundering at his temples. He leaped back and flung open the door of the room. For a moment he thought of flight—mad, raving flight in any direction whatsoever. Then he knew that he could never escape that which he had seen face to face, never elude the recollection of an Egyptian magic that was based on the reassembling of the scattered nine elements of a corpse. Rankin had penetrated the veil; he had pried, and loosed upon himself a doom.

He thought for an instant of the day when he had met Tarbis, a living, lovely woman. Each move that he had made had taken him farther from the woman he loved; yet the knowledge that there was no refuge from that which stared at him drove him to his final desperate resource.

Rankin snatched the oil lamp from its bracket and unscrewed its top. Then he poured the contents of the bowl over the ghastly testimony that damned and made horrible all those nights whose strange glamor had been Tarbis Dulac and her slow, archaic smile. He applied the still-burning wick to the linen bandages of the mummy. That would settle it, once and for all: decide now and for ever who and what was waiting for him in that living-room, one flight below, and centuries away.

The arbitration of the flames would be final. If Tarbis was a woman, she would forgive the wanton destruction of that grisly relic, and be glad that he was no longer concerned with the fantastic thought that she was an uncanny creature who had defied death. And if she were not a woman——

As THE flames enveloped the bandaged figure, he heard the voice of Tarbis screaming from the anguish of the dissolution of the bonds that tied the spiritual essences to the mummified body. He heard that awful cry from the living-room and knew that that fascinating simulacrum was in the agony of a second and final separation from its body. And the horror of having loved a shadow from the tomb was drowned in the greater hor-

ror of having caused the everlasting extinction of one who had loved life so well that she had returned from the dim abode of the dead.

Rankin dared not pass through that lower room to escape. And escape he must! Instantly, or never; yet to see beloved Tarbis—beloved though she was but the *khu*, the *ka*, the Name, and the Power assembled by a forgotten necromancer—to see her being consumed by the astral counterpart of the flames which enveloped the linen-bandaged body——

Rankin burst through the window at the head of the stairs. As he leaped, he heard above the crash and tinkle of glass a scream of mortal misery and despair more acute than any flame could wrench from her lips. He heard her very clearly pronounce his name.

She knew. As much of her as still remained knew that no power could ever restore her; that Rankin had destroyed her.

Rankin picked himself from the ground and fled blindly, without thought or sensation, and maddened by that final cry of unutterable agony. In his flight down the steep slope of the street leading from the hill of the citadel to the level of the city, Rankin stumbled and pitched headlong in a heap against a wall.

The impact numbed his senses and for the moment dulled the misery of his mind. Then a man's voice pronounced his name, and a firm hand helped him to his feet.

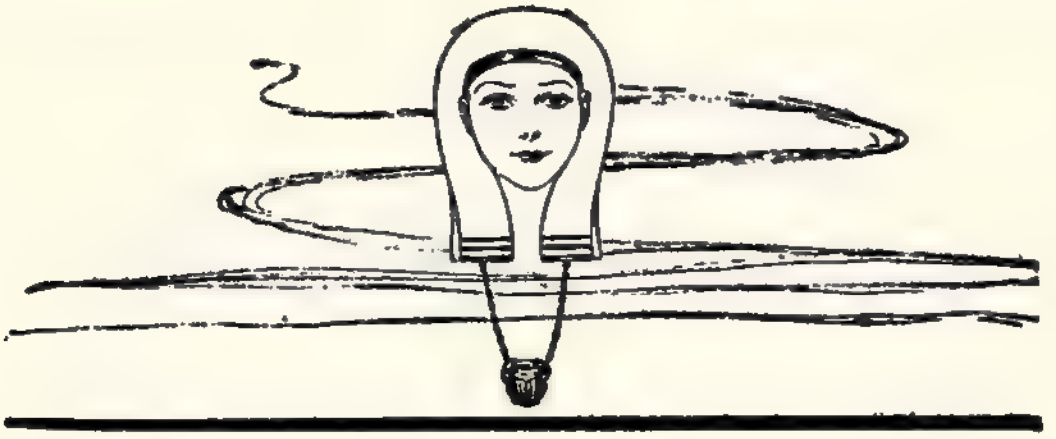
In the moonlight he recognized Father Peytral. The old priest's usually placid features were tense, as with a reflected terror that he read in Rankin's staring eyes.

"My son," said Father Peytral in a low, trembling voice, "I was watching, across the street. I heard, and I saw the flames. . . . You have freed her earth-bound soul . . . no, don't try to explain. . . . Little as I know, it is too much. But she is released from an abomination.

"I understand your grief," the old man continued, as he took Rankin's arm. "Let us pray for her soul, and the healing of yours."

"Too late," muttered Rankin in a strained, hoarse voice. The unutterable grief of Tarbis rang again through his memory. "My soul is damned beyond the redemption of time, or your prayers."

Rankin bowed; and the priest did not seek to detain him as he turned and strode down the slope.



The Man Who Returned

By EDMOND HAMILTON

The story of a man who was laid away in his coffin, and the unexpected reception he got when he returned to his friends

"I'm so happy, dear," she answered, turning toward him.

JOHN WOODFORD in his first moments of returning consciousness was not aware that he was lying in his coffin. He had only a dull knowledge that he lay in utter darkness and that there was a close, heavy quality in the air he breathed. He felt very weak and had only a dim curiosity as to where he was and how he had come there.

He knew that he was not lying in his bedroom at home, for the darkness there was never so complete as this. Home? That memory brought others to John Woodford's dulled brain and he recalled his wife now, and his son. He remembered too that he had been ill at home, very ill. And that was all that he could remember.

What was this place to which he had been brought? Why was the darkness so complete and the silence so unbroken, and why was there no one near him? He was a sick man, and they should have given him better care than this. He lay with a dull irritation at this treatment growing in his mind.

Then he became aware that breathing was beginning to hurt his lungs, that the air seemed warm and foul. Why did not someone open a window? His irritation grew to such a point that it spurred his muscles into action. He put out his right hand to reach for a bell or a light-button.

His hand moved slowly only a few inches to the side and then was stopped by an unyielding barrier. His fingers feebly examined it. It seemed a solid wall of wood or metal faced with smooth satin. It extended all along his right side, and when he weakly moved his other arm he found a similar wall on that side too.

His irritation gave way to mystification. Why in the world had they put him, a sick man, into this narrow place? Why, his shoulders rubbed against the sides on either side. He would soon know the reason for it, he told himself. He raised up to give utterance to a call that would bring those in attendance on him.

To his utter amazement his head bumped against a similar silk-lined wall directly above his face. He raised his arms in the darkness and discovered with growing astonishment that this wall or ceiling extended above him from head to foot, like those on either side. He lay upon a similar silk-padded surface. Why in the name of all that was holy had they put him into a silk-lined box like this?

Woodford's brain was puzzling this when a minor irritation made itself felt. His collar was hurting him. It was a high, stiff collar and it was pressing into the flesh of his neck. But this again was mystery—that he should be wearing a stiff collar. Why had they dressed a sick man in formal clothes and put him into this box?

Suddenly John Woodford shrieked, and the echoes of his scream reverberated around his ears like hideous, demoniac laughter. He suddenly knew the answer to it all. He was not a sick man any more at all. He was a dead man! Or at least they had thought him dead and had put him into this coffin and closed it down! He was buried alive!

The fears of his lifetime had come true; his secret, dark forebodings were hideously realized. From earliest childhood he had feared this very horror, for he had known himself subject to cataleptic sleeps hardly to be distinguished from death. He had had nightmares of premature burial. Even after the proneness to the cataleptic condition seemed to have left him, his fears had clung to him.

He had never told his wife or son of his fears, but they had persisted. They had inspired him to exact a promise that he would not be embalmed when buried, and would be interred in his private vault instead of in the earth. He had thought that in case he were not really dead these provisions might save his life, but now he realized that they only laid him open to the horrible fate he had dreaded. He knew with terrible certainty that he lay now in his coffin in the stone vault in the quiet cemetery. His screams could not be heard outside the vault, probably not even outside the coffin. As long as he had lain in cataleptic sleep he had not breathed, but now that he was awake and breathing, the air in the coffin was rapidly being exhausted and he was doomed to perish of suffocation.

John Woodford went temporarily mad. He screamed with fear-choked throat, and

as he shrieked he clawed with hands and feet at the unyielding satin-covered surfaces around and above him. He beat upward as best he could upon the coffin's lid with his clenched fists, but the heavy fastenings held firm.

He yelled until his throat was too swollen to give utterance to further sound. He clawed at the top until he broke his nails against the metal behind the silk padding. He raised his head and beat against the top with it until he fell back half-stunned.

He lay exhausted for moments, unable to make further efforts. In his brain marched a hideous pageant of horrors. The air seemed much closer and hotter now, seemed to burn his lungs with each breath he inhaled. With sudden return of his frenzy he shrieked and shrieked again.

This would not do. He was in a horrible situation but he must do the best he could not to give way to the horror. He had not many minutes left and he must use them in the most rational way possible to try to escape his terrible prison.

With this resolution a little calm came to him and he began to test his powers of movement. He clenched his fists again and hammered upward. But this did no good. His arms were jammed so close against his body by the coffin's narrowness that he could not strike a strong blow, nor had he any leverage to push strongly upward.

What about his feet? Feverishly he tried them, but found his kicks upward even less powerful. He thought of hunching up his knees and thus bursting up the lid, but found that he could not raise his knees high enough, and that when he pressed upward with them against the lid his feet simply slid away on the smooth silk of the coffin's bottom.

Now the breaths he drew seared his lungs and nostrils and his brain seemed on fire. He knew his strength was waning and that before long he would lose consciousness. He must do whatever he could swiftly. He felt the soft silk about him and the dreadful irony of it came home to him—he had been placed so lovingly in this death-trap!

He tried to turn on his side, for he thought now that he might use his shoulders to heave up against the lid. But turning was not easy in the cramped coffin and had to be accomplished by a myriad little hitching movements, an infinitely slow and painful process.

JOHN WOODFORD hitched and squirmed desperately until he lay on his left side. He found then that his right shoulder touched the lid above. He braced his left shoulder on the coffin's bottom and heaved upward with all his strength. There was no result: the lid seemed as immovable as ever.

He heaved again, despair fast filling his heart. He knew that very soon he would give way and shriek and claw. There was already a ringing in his ears. He had not many minutes left. With the utter frenzy of despair he heaved upward again with his shoulder.

This time there was a grating sound of something giving above. The sound was like the wild peal of thousands of bells of hope to John Woodford's ears. He heaved quickly again and again at the lid. Paying no attention to the bruising of his shoulder, he pressed upward with every ounce of his strength.

There was another grating sound, then a snap of metal fastenings breaking, and as he shoved upward with convulsive effort the heavy metal lid swung up and over and struck the stone wall with a deep clang. A flood of cold air struck him. He struggled up over the coffin's side,

dropped a few feet to a stone floor, and lay in a huddled mass.

It was minutes before he had mastered himself and summoned enough strength to stand up. He stood inside a little vault that held no coffin but his own. Its interior was in darkness save for a dim shaft of starlight that came through a tiny window high up in one wall.

John Woodford stumbled to the vault's heavy iron doors and fumbled at their lock. He had an uncontrollable horror of this place that had almost been the scene of his perishing. The coffin there on the shelf with its lid leaning against the stone wall seemed gaping for him with its dark, cavernous mouth.

He worked frantically at the lock. What if he were not able to escape from the vault? But the heavy lock was easily manipulated on the inside, he found. He managed to turn its tumbler and shoot its bar and then the heavy iron doors swung open. John Woodford stepped eagerly out into the night.

He stopped on the vault's threshold, closing the doors behind him and then looking forth with inexpressible emotions. The cemetery lay in the starlight before him as a dim, ghostly city of looming monuments and vaults. Little sheets of ice glinted here and there in the dim light, and the air was biting in its cold. Outside the cemetery's low wall blinked the lights of the surrounding city.

Woodford started eagerly across the cemetery, unheeding of the cold. Somewhere across the lights of the city was his home, his wife, and somewhere his son—thinking him dead, mourning him. How glad they would be when he came back to them, alive! His heart expanded as he pictured their amazement and their joy at his return.

He came to the low stone wall of the cemetery and clambered quickly over it. It was apparently well after midnight, for the cars and pedestrians in sight in this suburban section were few.

Woodford hurried along the street. He passed people who looked at him in surprize, and only after some time did he realize the oddness of his appearance. A middle-aged man clad in a formal suit and lacking hat and overcoat was an odd person to meet on a suburban street on a winter midnight.

But he paid small attention to their stares. He did turn up the collar of his frock coat to keep out the cold. But he hardly felt the frigid air in the emotions that filled him. He wanted to get home, to get back to Helen, to witness her stupefaction and dawning joy when she saw him returned from the dead, living.

A STREET-CAR came clanging along and John Woodford stepped quickly out to board it, but almost as quickly stepped back. He had mechanically thrust his hand into his pocket and found it quite empty. That was to be expected, of course. They didn't put money in a dead man's clothes. No matter, he would soon be there on foot.

As he reached the section in which his home was located, he glanced in a store-window in passing and saw on a tear-sheet calendar a big black date that made him gasp. It was a date ten days later than the one he last remembered. He had been buried in the vault for more than a week!

More than a week in that coffin! It seemed incredible, terrible. But that did not matter now, he told himself. It would only make the joy of his wife and son the greater when they found he was alive. To Woodford himself it seemed as though he were returning from a journey rather than from the dead.

Returned from the dead! As he has-

toned along the tree-bordered street on which his home was located, he almost laughed aloud as he thought of how amazed some of his friends would be when they met him. They would think him a ghost or a walking corpse, would perhaps shrink in terror from him at first.

But that thought brought another: he must not walk in on Helen too abruptly. The husband she had buried ten days ago must not appear too suddenly or the shock might easily kill her. He must contrive somehow to soften the shock of his appearance, must make sure that he did not startle her too much.

With this resolve in mind, when he reached his big house set well back from the street, Woodford turned aside through the grounds instead of approaching the front entrance. He saw windows lighted in the library of the house and he went toward them. He would see who was there, would try to break the news of his return gently to Helen.

He silently climbed onto the terrace outside the library windows and approached the tall casements. He peered in.

Through the silken curtains inside he could clearly see the room's soft-lit interior, cozy with the shelves of his books and with the lamps and fireplace.

Helen, his wife, sat on a sofa with her back partly toward the window. Beside her sat a man that Woodford recognized as one of their closest friends, Curtis Dawes.

Sight of Dawes gave Woodford an idea. He would get Dawes outside in some way and have him break the news of his return to Helen. His heart was pounding at sight of his wife.

Then Curtis Dawes spoke, his words dimly audible to Woodford outside the window. "Happy, Helen?" he was asking.

"*So* happy, dear," she answered, turning toward him.

Out in the darkness Woodford stared in perplexed wonder. How could she be happy when she thought her husband dead and buried?

He heard Curtis Dawes speaking again. "It was a long time," the man was saying. "Those years that I waited, Helen."

She laid her hand tenderly on his. "I know, and you never said a word. I respected so your loyalty to John."

She looked into the fire musingly. "John was a good husband, Curt. He really loved me and I never let him guess that I didn't love him, that it was you, his friend, I loved. But when he died I couldn't feel grief. I felt regret for his sake, of course, but underneath it was the consciousness that at last you and I were free to love each other."

Dawes' arm went tenderly around her shoulder. "Darling, you don't regret that I talked you into marrying me right away? You don't care that people may be talking about us?"

"I don't care for anything but you," she told him. "John was dead, young Jack has his own home and wife, and there was no reason in the world why we should not marry. I'm glad that we did."

In the darkness outside the window a stunned, dazed John Woodford saw her lift an illumined face toward the man's.

"I'm proud to be your wife at last, dear, no matter what anyone may say about us," he heard.

WOODFORD drew slowly back from the window. He paused in the darkness under the trees, his mind shaken, torn.

So *this* was his homecoming from the tomb? This was the joy he had anticipated in Helen when he returned?

It couldn't be the truth! His ears had deceived him—Helen could not be the wife of Curtis Dawes! Yet part of his

mind told him remorselessly that it was true.

He had always sensed that Helen's feeling for him was not as strong as his for her. But that she had loved Dawes he had never dreamed. Yet now he remembered Dawes' frequent visits, the odd silences between him and Helen. He remembered a thousand trifles that spoke of the love which these two had cherished for each other.

What was he, John Woodford, to do? Walk in upon them and tell them that they had been premature in counting him dead, that he had come back to claim his position in life and his wife again?

He couldn't do it! If Helen during those years had wavered in the least in her loyalty to him, he would have had less compunction. But in the face of those years of silent, uncomplaining life with him, he couldn't now reappear to her and blast her new-found happiness and blacken her name.

Woodford laughed a little, bitterly. He was then to be an Enoch Arden from the tomb. A strange rôle, surely, yet it was the only one open to him.

What was he to do? He couldn't let Helen know now that he was alive, couldn't return to the home that had been his. Yet he must go somewhere. Where?

With a sudden leap of the heart he thought of Jack, his son. He could at least go to Jack, let his son know that he was living. Jack at least would be overjoyed to see him, and would keep the fact of his return secret from his mother.

John Woodford, with that thought rekindling a little his numbed feelings, started back through the trees toward the street. Where he had approached the house but minutes before with eager steps, he stole away now like a thief fearful of being observed.

He reached the street and started across the blocks toward the cottage of his son. Few were abroad, for the cold seemed increasing and it was well past midnight. Woodford mechanically rubbed his stiffened hands as he hurried along.

He came to his son's neat little white cottage, and felt relief as he saw lights from its lower windows also. He had feared that no one would be up. He crossed the frozen lawn to the lighted windows, intent on seeing if Jack were there and if he were alone.

He peered in, as he had done at his own home. Jack was sitting at a little desk and his young wife was perched on the arm of his chair and was listening as he explained something to her from a sheet of writing on the desk.

John Woodford, pressing his face against the cold window-pane, could hear Jack's words.

"You see, Dorothy, we can just make it by adding our savings to Dad's insurance money," Jack was saying.

"Oh, Jack!" cried Dorothy happily. "And it's what you've wanted so long, a little business of your own!"

Jack nodded. "It won't be very big to start with, but I'll make it grow, all right. This is the chance I've been hoping for and I'm sure going to make the most of it.

"Of course," he said, his face sobering a little, "it's too bad about Dad going like that. But seeing that he *did* die, the insurance money solves our problems of getting started. Now you take the overhead——" he said, and began unreeling a string of figures to the intent Dorothy.

JOHN WOODFORD drew slowly back from the window. He felt more dazed and bewildered than ever. He had forgotten the insurance he had carried, which he had intended to give Jack his start. But of course, he saw now, it had

been paid over when he was believed dead.

He was not dead, but living. Yet if he let Jack know that, it meant the end of his son's long-desired opportunity. Jack would have to return the insurance money to the company, wrecking his dreamed-of chance. How could he let him know, then?

He, John Woodford, had already decided that he must remain dead to his wife and therefore to the world. He might as well remain so to his son, also. It was for the best. John Woodford melted away from the cottage into the darkness.

When he reached the street he stood in indecision. A freezing wind had begun to blow, and he felt very cold without an overcoat. Mechanically he turned his coat-collar closer around his neck.

He tried to think what he must do. Neither Helen nor Jack must know that he was living, and that meant that no one in the city must know. He must get out of the town to some other place, take up life under some other name.

But he would need help, money, to do that. Where was he to get them? Barred as he was from calling on his wife or son, to whom could he turn for help without letting his return become generally known?

Howard Norse! The name came at once to Woodford's lips. Norse had been his employer, head of the firm where Woodford had held a position for many years. Woodford had been one of his oldest employees. Howard Norse would help him to get a position somewhere else, and would keep his reappearance secret.

He knew where Norse's residence was, several miles out in the country. But he couldn't walk that far, and he had no taxi or trolley-fare. He would have to telephone Norse.

WOODFORD walked back toward the city's central section, head bent against the piercing cold wind. He succeeded in finding an all-night lunchroom whose proprietor allowed him to use the telephone. With cold-stiffened fingers he dialed Norse's number.

Howard Norse's sleepy voice soon came over the wire. "Mr. Norse, this is Woodford—John Woodford," he said quickly.

There was an incredulous exclamation from Howard Norse. "You're crazy! John Woodford's been dead and buried for a couple of weeks!"

"No, I tell you it's John Woodford!" insisted Woodford. "I'm not dead at all, I'm as living as you are! If you'll come into town for me you'll see for yourself."

"I'm not likely to drive to town at two in the morning to look at a maniac," Norse replied acidly. "Whatever your game is, you're wasting your time on me."

"But you've got to help me!" Woodford cried. "I've got to have money, a chance to get out of the city without anyone knowing. I gave your firm my services for years and now you've got to give me help!"

"Listen to me, whoever you are," snapped Norse over the wire. "I was bothered long enough with John Woodford when he was living—he was so inefficient we'd have kicked him out long ago if we hadn't been sorry for him. But now that he's dead, you needn't think you can bother me in his name. Good-night!"

The receiver clicked in Woodford's unbelieving ear.

He stared at the instrument. So *that* was what they had really thought of him

at the firm—there where he had always thought himself one of the most highly valued of employees!

But there must be someone upon whom he could call for help; someone he could convince that John Woodford was still living; someone who would be glad to think that he might be living.

What about Willis Grann? Grann had been his closest friend next to Curtis Dawes. He had lent money more than once to Woodford in the past, and certainly should be willing to do so now.

Hastily Woodford called Grann's number. This time he was more careful in his approach, when he heard the other's voice.

"Willis, I've got something to tell you that may sound incredible, but you've got to believe, do you hear?" he said.

"Who is this and what in the world are you talking about?" demanded Grann's startled voice.

"Willis, this is John Woodford. Do you hear, John Woodford! Everyone thinks I'm dead but I'm not, and I've got to see you."

"What?" cried the other's voice over the telephone. "Why, you must be drunk. I saw Woodford lying in his coffin myself, so I know he's dead."

"I tell you, it's not so, I'm not dead!" Woodford almost screamed. "I've got to get some money, though, to get away from here and you must lend it to me! You always lent it to me before, and I need it now worse than ever I did. I've got to get away!"

"So that's it!" said Willis Grann. "Because I used to help Woodford out you think you can get money from me by just calling me up and pretending that you're he. Why, Woodford himself was the biggest pest in the world with his constant borrowings. I felt almost relieved when he died. And now you try to make me believe that he's come back from the dead to pester me again!"

"But he never died—I'm John Woodford really——" Woodford protested vainly.

"Sorry, old top," returned Grann's mocking voice. "Next time pick a living person to impersonate, not a dead one."

He hung up. John Woodford slowly replaced the receiver and made his way out to the street.

THE wind was blowing harder and now was bringing with it clouds of fine snow that stung against his face like sand. He shivered as he stumbled along the streets of dark shops, his body freezing as his mind was frozen.

There was no one from whom he could get help, he saw. His paramount necessity was still to get out of the city, and to do that he must rely on himself.

The icy blasts of the snow-laden wind penetrated through his thin coat. His hands were shaking with the cold.

A sign caught Woodford's eye, the illuminated beacon of a relief lodging-house. At once he made his way toward it. He could at least sleep there tonight, get started from the city in the morning.

The shabby men dozing inside in chairs looked queerly at him as he entered. So did the young clerk to whom he made his way.

"I'd—I'd like to stay here tonight," he said to the clerk.

The clerk stared. "Are you trying to kid me?"

Woodford shook his head. "No, I'm penniless and it's cold outside. I've got to stay somewhere."

The clerk smiled disdainfully. "Listen, fellow, no one with duds like yours is that hard up. Scram before I call a cop."

Woodford looked down at his clothes, his frock coat and stiff white shirt and

gleaming patent-leather shoes, and understood.

He said desperately to the clerk, "But these clothes don't mean anything. I tell you, I haven't a penny!"

"Will you beat it before I have you thrown out of here?" the clerk demanded.

Woodford backed toward the door. He went outside again into the cold. The wind had increased and more snow was falling. The front of Woodford's coat was soon covered with it as he pushed along.

It came to him as a queer joke that the splendor of his funeral clothes should keep him from getting help now. He couldn't even beg a passer-by for a dime. Who would give to a panhandler in formal clothes?

Woodford felt his body quivering and his teeth chattering from sheer cold. If he could only get out of the blast of the icy wind! His eyes sought desperately along the street for a hallway where he might shelter himself.

He found a deep doorway and crouched down inside it, out of the wind and driving snow. But hardly had he done so when a heavy step paused in front of him and a nightstick rapped his feet smartly. An authoritative voice ordered him to get up and go home.

Woodford did not try to explain to the policeman that he was not a drunken citizen fallen by the way. He got wearily to his feet and moved on along the street, unable to see more than a few feet ahead for the whirl of snow.

The snow on which he was walking penetrated the thin shoes he wore, and his feet were soon even colder than the rest of his body. He walked with slow, dragging steps, head bent against the storm of white.

He was dully aware that the dark shops beside him had given way to a low stone wall. With a sudden start he recognized it as the wall of the cemetery which he had left but hours before, the cemetery from a vault in which he had escaped.

The vault! Why hadn't he thought of it before? he asked himself. The vault would be a shelter from the freezing wind and snow. He could stay there for the night without anyone objecting.

He paused, feeling for a moment a little renewal of his former terrors. Did he dare go back into that place from which he had struggled to escape? Then an extra-strong blast of icy air struck him and decided him—the vault would be shelter and that was what his frozen body craved more than anything else.

Stiffly he climbed over the low stone wall and made his way through the cemetery's whitened monuments and vaults toward the one from which he had escaped. The driving snow covered his tracks almost as he made them, as he trudged toward the vault.

He reached it and tried its iron doors anxiously. Suppose he had locked them when he left! But to his relief they swung open, and he entered and shut them. It was dark inside, but he was out of the wind and snow now and his numbed body felt a little relief.

WOODFORD sat down in the corner of the vault. It was a shelter for the night, at least. It seemed rather ironic that he had had to come back here for shelter, but it was something to be thankful for that he had even this. In the morning, when the storm was over, he could leave without anyone seeing and get out of the city.

He sat listening to the wind and snow shriek outside. The stone floor of the vault was very cold, so cold that he felt his limbs stiffening and cramping, and finally he stood up unsteadily and paced

to and fro in the vault, chafing his arms and hands.

If he had only a blanket, or even a heavy coat, to lie upon! He'd freeze there upon the stone floor. Then as he turned in his pacing he bumped into the coffin on the shelf and a new idea was born in his mind.

The coffin! Why, the interior of it was lined deep with silk and satin padding. It would be warm in the coffin. He could sleep in it far better than on the cold stone floor. But did he dare to reenter it?

Again Woodford felt faintly the former terrors he had experienced when he had awakened in it. But they meant nothing, he told himself. He would not be fastened in, this time, and his frozen flesh yearned for the warmth of the coffin's lining.

Slowly, carefully, he climbed up and lowered himself into the coffin and stretched out. The silk and padding he sank into had a grateful warmth. He lowered his head upon the soft little pillow with a sigh of relief. This was better.

He experienced an almost luxurious comfort now; but after he had lain for a little while he felt that the top of his body was still cold, where the cold air came into the open coffin's top. That cold air entering kept him from being completely warm. If the lid above him were just closed to keep out the cold air——

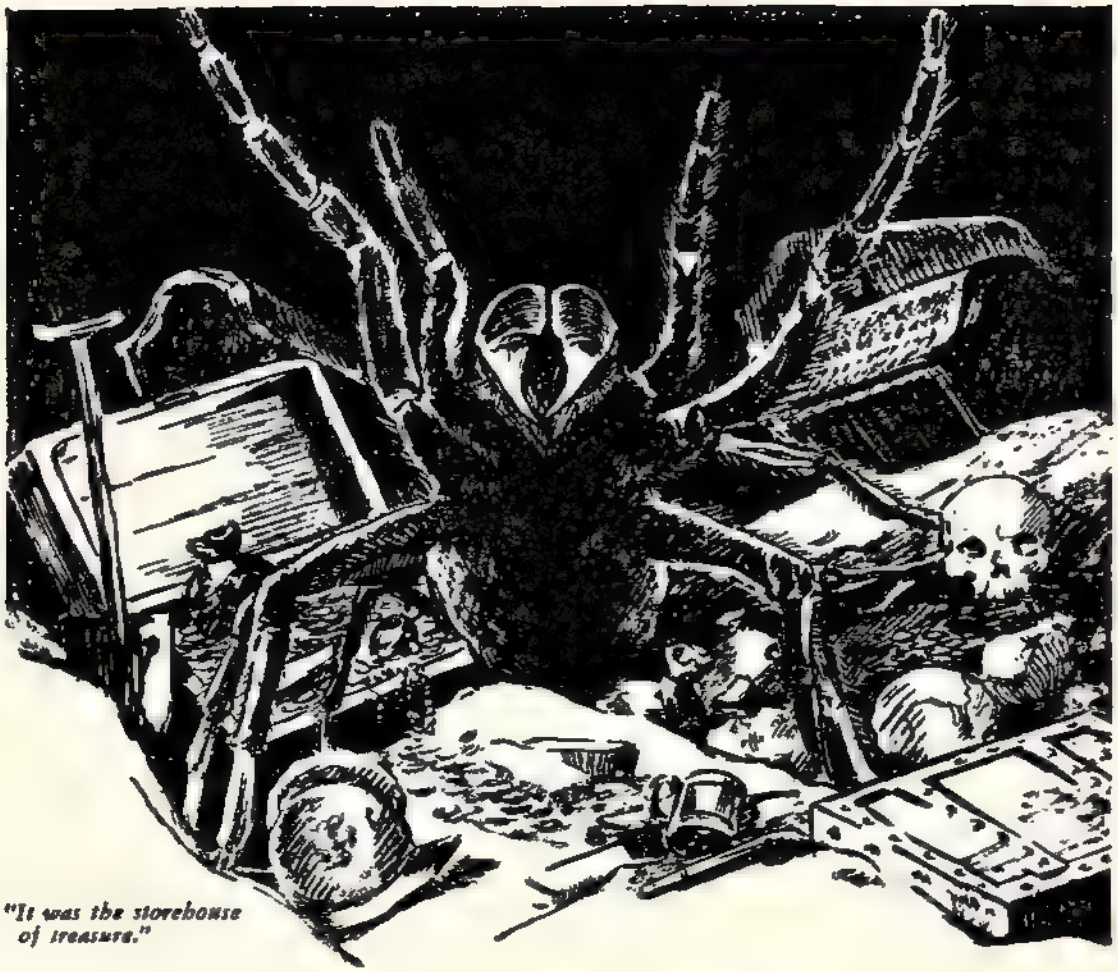
He reached up and got the edge of the heavy metal lid, then let it down upon himself. He was completely in the dark, now, inside the closed coffin. But he was warm, too, for the lid kept out the cold air. And he was getting warmer all the time, as his body warmed up the interior.

Yes, it was far more comfortable with the lid closed. An even warmth now pervaded his whole being, and the air inside the coffin was still getting warmer and thicker. He felt a little drowsy now, as he breathed that warm air, felt luxuriously sleepy as he lay on the soft silk.

It was getting a little harder to breathe, somehow, as the air became thicker. He ought really to raise the coffin lid and let in some fresh air. But it was so warm now, and the air outside was so cold, and he was more and more sleepy.

Something dim and receding in his fading consciousness told him that he was on the way to suffocation. But what if he was? was his sleepy thought. He was better off in here than back in the world outside. He had been a fool ever to fight so hard before to get out of his warm, comfortable coffin, to get back to that outside world.

No, it was better like this, the darkness and the warmth and the sleep that advanced. Nobody would ever know that he had awakened at all, that he had been away from here at all. Everything would be just as before—just as before. And with that comforting assurance, John Woodford was swept farther and farther down the dark stream of unconsciousness from which this time there would be no returning.



"It was the storehouse of treasure."

The Place of Hairy Death

By ANTHONY RUD

A tale of a horde of venomous spiders and two men—one brave, the other not so brave—in a hidden treasure-room of the Mayas

AT LEAST not alone, *Señor!* If I were like you, young, handsome, and with the strength of two men in my arms, I would not venture at all down into those ancient workings. I foresee trouble; and in those horrible, dripping tunnels below Croszchen Pahna where death may lurk in every slime-lined crevice, a comrade who will not flinch is even more necessary than your own great courage.

Ah, it is not a nice place down there! I have been part-way, many years ago. I suppose every young *mozo* in all this district of Quintana Roo once could say as much. For there was a tale of treasure,

of a room of gold and skeletons. Not this cheap ore which remains, and which costs more to mine than the ore will yield. A storeroom of the heavy nuggets found in rotten rock. And sealed up with that gold, the bodies of all the Indians who worked down in the bowels of the earth for their masters, the *Conquistadores.*

Not the first time I ventured there, but the second, death reached out with many hairy fingers and caught its prey. The first time I descended alone, and in terror. I returned to the blessed daylight very quickly—but not alone. A multitude of hairy horrors came with me! Even now after nearly thirty years, when I eat to a fulness of *carne* at nightfall, I know what will happen. Ever since then, in all my dreams I see——

But the *señor* shrugs. He is a hothead, like all *Americanos.* He wishes knowledge, not the fancies of an old man. It shall be so. Even today, the offer of fifty pesos is enough to tempt; for after all, one must eat. If the *señor* will get a good comrade, and both wish it, I shall guide them half-way. That is as far as my knowledge extends. I will build a fire, then, in the Room of Many Craters, and wait. But I will not go unless I judge the *señor* has a man of bravery for a comrade.

How do I know the Room of Many Craters is half-way? Well, it is a guess, *Señor,* but a good guess, I believe. The Indians who slaved in the mine for their Spanish masters never saw daylight. They dwelt in this huge room, which is a great bubble in the rock.

Also, a hundred or more of them worked here in this room. The round craters were worn in the floor by many men pushing against tree-trunks, and walking endlessly in circles. This ground the rotten ore, and in time scoured out the craters in the floor.

According to old story, which has much sign of truth, the gold secured from the ore had to be stored many months. Ships came seldom, not every few weeks like today when steam drives ships as legs drive water-beetles, wherever they wish to go. There were no strongholds above ground; so the gold was taken a long way through a secret passage, and stored in a barren room where guards watched night and day.

And that room once was found, though its unimaginable store of yellow gold still remains untouched. Unless more slides have come, it is probable that the *señor* will know the right passage or crevice, for before he may force a way it will be necessary to move a moldered skeleton.

That is not the short and rather frail bone frame of one of my people. That youth was strong, blue of eye like the *señor* himself. Yellow of hair. Easy to make smile or laugh. But he did not laugh once, from the time he, his companion and I reached the Room of Craters, where I was to wait. There is a hot, wet atmosphere down there. And among the many things which hang in that heavy air is a queer, fetid stench which sends the heart of man down into his boots.

That time, when I saw the two men leave me by my fire in the Room of Craters, I crossed myself and prayed for their safe return. I did not even think of the gold, then, though they had promised me all I could carry, as my share. The one with blue eyes, the laughing one, was such as my mother's people worshipped in the old days, you understand. I was loyal to his companion, naturally; but to *him* I would render any service but one! I would not go farther into that place of hairy death! No, not even loyalty could take me there. That is why I caution the *señor* to choose his comrade with care.

Those two young men left me, and

vanished into the wet dark. And only the wrong one returned. I must tell a little of those men and their story, so the *señor* can know how that could be. Usually it is the other way. In most struggles with darkness and evil, the strongest and most right it is, who comes back to tell the tale. But not this time.

THE tale, the *señor* must understand, is pieced together from fragments. It may not all be true exactly as I tell it. But the main facts are as I say. There is no need even to imagine a hatred or jealousy between the two men. There was none. One man was strong and poor. The other was weak—and the heir to millions of *Americano* gold. He, at least, should never have risked health and mind and life for more wealth. But thus it is in this world. No one is satisfied.

The blue-eyed, laughing man had been the superintendent of the great jeniquen rope factory in Valladolid, up north forty miles from here, in Yucatan. The *señor* doubtless knows the factory, for he came by narrow-gage railway, and Valladolid is the terminus.

The factory, and perhaps two hundred square miles of the great jeniquen plantations, were owned by the *Americano* father of the second man, the dark-skinned young fellow who was known as Señor Lester Ainslee.

It seems that the great father of Señor Lester did not approve of his boy. It was wished that Señor Lester get out into the jungle and what is called "rough it," drinking less wine, smoking fewer cigarettes, and learning to work hard with his hands. That was strange to me; for a sharp glance told me that one single day in the broiling sun, cutting jeniquen, would kill the delicate boy. But fathers are strange. They love and marry women who are delicate and nervous, and who die young. Then they demand their own strength in their offspring—when it is well known that Nature orders it otherwise. No breeder of fine horses would be such a fool. He would look for the characteristics of the dam to appear in the male colt; and those of the sturdy sire to show themselves in the female get.

Señor Jim Coulter—he was the blond, laughing one—was perhaps twenty-eight, though he looked not so much older than his companion. The boy, a fortnight or so before, had got drunk to celebrate his twenty-first birthday, and there were purple saucers under his eyes remaining from that bad time.

Then it was that the rich father could endure no more. He sent the boy down from the United States to work in the rope factory, or in the fields. Alongside the most ignorant peons, you understand —mere beasts who have slaved for generations under the lash of the overseers of the *haciendados!*

It was asking the impossible. The factory superintendent, Señor Jim Coulter, sent many telegraph messages; for the unreasonable father would hold him responsible, and he knew that nothing save quick death could happen to the frail young man in his charge.

In the end it was agreed that Señor Jim would take one month of holiday from the rope factory, and accompany the boy from the north on a trip into the jungle. The Señor Jim somewhere had got hold of a story which told of the treasure vault still remaining deep in this Madre d'Oro Mine, two thousand feet below the ancient temple at Croszchen Pahna. The story was an old one to me, of course, and probably true.

When they came to me, hearing that I had ventured down into these old workings at much risk to my life, and I assured them that no one ever had dared

go far enough to find the treasure room, they nearly burst with excitement. What to them were walls that fell at a touch? What were a few deadly vipers, a thousand ten-inch scorpions waving their armored tails, or the horrible hosts of *conechos*—those great, leaping spiders which *Americanos* call tarantulas?

True, *Señor,* you frown impatiently. You will say to me, ah, but everyone knows a tarantula is not deadly poison. Well, perhaps that is true. I once knew a man who was bitten in the lobe of the ear, and lived. But he had a sharp knife. And after all, part of an ear is not so much to sacrifice, when life itself is in hazard.

The *conechos, Señor,* which dwell in the slimy crevices of this old Madre d'Oro Mine below the wettest cellars of Croszchen Pahna, are of a larger variety than those one finds feeding on bananas. Also they are whitish-pink in color, and sightless. They do not need the eyes. They leap surely through the dark at what they wish to bite. . . .

The way down as far as the Room of Craters is not far, as miles are measured up here in the blessed sunshine. Perhaps there was a day when the bearded Spaniards walked safely enough from the broken shaft mouth, down the steep-slanted manways, helped here and there by rough ladders, in no more than one hour.

I know not if the way remains passable now. But if it is no worse than it was the day those two young *Americanos* and I descended to the Room of Craters, it will take three active, daring men more than ten times that space of time.

Roped to each other, we crawled and slid down the terrible passages. I led, and carried in my left hand a long and heavy broom of twigs bound with wire. With this I struck ahead before I placed my foot—or cleared a way of vipers and scorpions before lying down and wriggling feet foremost through narrow, low apertures where time and again my coming was the signal for a fall of wet, rotten rock.

I call to your attention, *Señor,* that the way to enter such unknown passages always is feet first. Then if there are creatures waiting unseen to strike or leap at one from the side, they are apt to waste their venom on the heavy boots, or on the thighs which are wrapped in many thicknesses of paper, under the heavy trousers.

Also it is easier to withdraw, if a serious slide occurs.

Señor Jim, who followed me, carried a strong lantern. Another, smaller one for my use in the Room of Craters was attached to his belt, near the taut rope. Señor Lester, who came last, bore a miner's pick, for use in breaking through walled-up passages.

Once I was knocked flat and pinned down by a flake of rock like a sheet of slate, which fell before I even touched it; jarred free, no doubt, by the vibrations of our footsteps.

With the pick, however, Señor Jim quickly released me. And while he was working there I heard him strike swiftly once, twice, thrice with the pick, though not on the rock which held me.

Then he cursed, and his voice held a note of wonderment.

"Fastest thing I ever saw!" he muttered; while behind him Señor Lester whimpered aloud. I knew he had viewed some frightful thing, and had failed to kill it with the pick.

That was the first of the sickly-white spiders, the *conechos.* I had warned the two young men, of course; but until one sees those horrible, sightless, hairy monsters, and learns how they can leap and dodge—even a swift bullet, some main-

tain!—there can be no understanding of the terror they inspire in men.

From then on the *conechos,* which never appear near the surface, became more numerous. It was necessary for us to shout, and to hurl small rocks ahead of us, to drive them into their crevices. Otherwise they might leap at us. And such is the weird soundless telegraphy of such creatures, that if any living thing is bitten by a spider, all the other spiders know it instantly, and come. Whatever the living thing may be, it is buried under an avalanche of horrid albino hunger.

LONG before we reached the Room of Craters, Señor Lester—the weak one—was exhausted. He was a shivering wreck from terror, the foul air, and the heat, and was pleading with Señor Jim to go back.

The other one would not have it. He kept mocking the dangers, laughing shortly—and how soon that brave laugh was to be stilled! But Señor Lester got to stumbling; weeping as he staggered or crawled after us. He dropped the pick, and neither of us knew, until we reached a place where the enlargement of an opening had to be done. Then we had to retrace many weary steps to secure the tool.

At last we reached the Room of Craters, where a fire may be built from the old logs which were used by the Indian slaves in pushing the ore mill. There was comparative safety, and we rested, while Señor Jim did all he could to revive the courage of his companion.

I could have told him it was of no use; but in those days I too was young, and did not feel it my place to advise. Señor Lester quieted; but every minute or two his whole thin frame would be racked by a fit of shuddering. I was glad I had made it very plain I would go no farther, but would wait for them here. Señor Jim tried every inducement, but I held firm. The few pesos I had earned outright were enough. I did not care much whether or not they found gold. The one time before I had come this far, I had penetrated a few dozen yards farther, into a narrow passage I deemed might be the one leading to the treasure room. And I knew what that passage contained—white, hairy death!

So I huddled over my fire of punk logs, ate food from the small pack I carried, slept, and waited through the weary hours. I thought hideous things, though none was worse than reality. My knowledge of what happened, you understand, *Señor,* comes in great part from the ravings of a man to which I was forced to listen.

In the narrow, slide-obstructed passage which led on, those two young ones fought their way. How Señor Jim ever made the other follow as far as he did, is not for me to guess. But struggle on they did; and at length they reached a blank ending of the passage—a place where centuries before, the Spaniards had walled in their treasure, and with it the human slaves who had dug, ground and carried the ore and gold.

There was one small hole pierced in this wall. *Quien sabe?* Perhaps the prisoners broke through that much. It is likely that the dons would have a swordsman waiting outside as a guard, ready to chop off the groping arms of those dying desperate ones.

But while Señor Lester sank on the rock floor, too spent now to help, Señor Jim set at the wall with the pick. In time, by dint of much sweat, and many pauses in which he used the broom to brush aside the spiders, which were numerous at this low level, he had broken

in a hole large enough so that a man could crawl through feet first.

He flashed the lantern into the chamber which opened beyond the wall. *It was the treasure house!*

His yell at sight of the piles of gold, long since burst from their hide sacks and spilled together, aroused Señor Lester, who was able to stagger to his feet and look. They saw, besides the great mountain of gold, white traceries on the floor which might once have been the moldered human bones of the imprisoned slaves. Yes, it was the storehouse of treasure!

Frantically then, forgetting his caution which had brought him and his companion farther than any other white man, Señor Jim wriggled into the hole he had made. He would have got through, too —only there was a slight movement of the rock, just a subsidence of perhaps six inches.

It squeezed him at the waist! It held him horizontal and helpless, two feet from the rock floor!

Señor Lester cried out in weak terror, but Señor Jim did not lose his head.

"You'll have to break me out—quick!" he commanded. "It's slowly squeezing the insides out of me! Quick, the pick! Hit it right up above me—there!" He nodded with his head, both arms being pinioned so that he could not point.

Whimpering, whining, almost unable to lift the pick, the other tried to obey. But that was when the first hairy thing fell or leaped from above. It landed squarely on Señor Jim's upturned face. He screeched with horror — then with pain and realization that this was the end.

Almost before the sound had left his whitening lips, the *others* came, leaping, bounding, from the roof, along the walls, from the floor. The albino horde!

And from Señor Lester fled the last vestige of manhood. Jerking back on the rope which held him to his doomed companion, he sawed at it with his knife.

When it broke he fled, screaming himself to drown the awful, smothering sounds from the end of the passage. . . .

THAT is not quite all, *Señor*. I heard the ghastly tale, though not until I had slept safely many hours, there in the Room of Many Craters. The young *Americano* had taken at least seven or eight hours to fight his way back to me. There was no hope for the other.

I brought Señor Lester up into the blessed daylight, though because of his complete collapse we were a whole day and night on the way.

Until his father could come from the United States, I cared for the young man, who could not leave his bed. A part of his mind had gone, it seemed, and he raved about the death of his friend, saying the same things over and over. I was very glad to surrender Señor Lester to his saddened father, who took his boy home where good doctors could care for him.

It was almost a year later when a scarecrow came to my hut. It was Señor Lester, dressed now in rags, but with a sheaf of money with which he tried to bribe me to descend with him again into the old mine!

Valgame Dios! I would not have gone then for a million million dollars, *Americano* gold! The fear was too lately on me. So then he threw back his head, his voice shaking, and said:

"Then I must go alone! I can never rest till I bring up Jim's body! I—I was a coward! I *am* a coward!"

"Well, that is the truth," I admitted, "but there are many cowards. What difference can it make now?"

But he was resolute—in words. In ac-

tions, not so resolute. He had made up his mind to go again, this time alone; but days dragged by. He lived in my hut. He jumped each time a gamecock crowed, every time a door was closed. He was a nervous shadow, not even as strong as he had been when I saw him first. He had escaped from a sanatorium up north, and come back here secretly, I discovered. I decided to send a message to his father. When that message did go it was somewhat different from what I intended.

I was a bachelor then, *Señor*. The little spiders, the *malichos*, spun their webs where they would on the rafters of my hut. I did not care. The mice played around freely at night; for my striped cat was old and fat, sleeping much and doing little.

To keep the young *Americano* from those sudden screeching fits, though, I had to climb up with a broom and wipe away the spider webs. They would build new ones. It did not matter.

"I can't *stand* them!" he would wail, shuddering all over. I thought to myself then there was little danger he ever would go again into the Madre d'Oro Mine. And that was true. He never went again.

That very night as I slept in my blankets on the floor, I was awakened suddenly. Señor Lester had leapt up, screaming as I hope I never hear another man or woman scream! He jumped around. I could not quiet him. I made a light hurriedly, hearing him fall to the floor.

He was stiffening then, head arched back.

"It *bit* me! I killed it!" he shrieked. Then came a final shudder, and he went limp—dead!

Now that was too fast even for the bite of a great pit-viper. I tried to find what had killed him. His two hands had been clenched together, but now in death they relaxed. I drew them apart. I knew the truth, and my heart went faint within me. He had been dreaming of the hairy spiders, when——

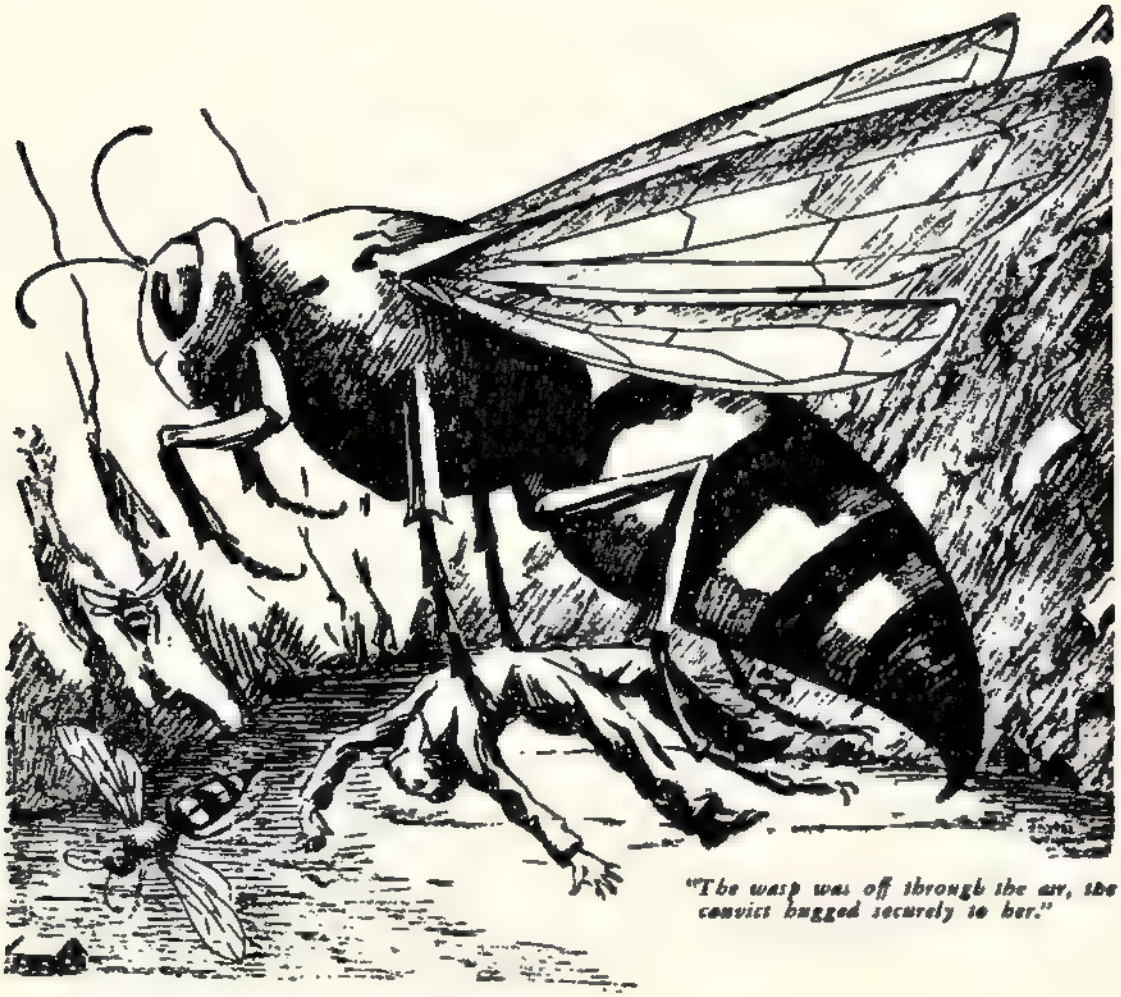
Crushed between the palms of his thin, nervous hands, was the dead body of a small mouse!

To a Bullet-Pierced Skull

By ALFRED I. TOOKE

An empty skull! But once, no doubt, a vast
Amount of knowledge into you was passed,
And stored for use whenever you required;
But when a bullet into you was fired,
All of those years of hoarded knowledge fled
In one split second, as you tumbled, dead.
Only the knowledge parted with lived on.
What you had hoarded, in a flash was gone.

Life is like that! It's those who give the most,
Who may be truly said to live the most;
While those who hoard their knowledge find life dull,
And leave behind nought but an empty skull.



"The wasp was off through the air, the convict hugged securely to her."

The Solitary Hunters

By DAVID H. KELLER

A powerful story of gigantic insects and a blood-freezing horror that awaited the doomed men who were sent as prisoners into the crater of an extinct volcano

The Story Thus Far

PROFESSOR KINGSTON, entomologist, answers an advertisement in the *Times*, and finds that the man who is offering employment is Serpolis, for many years leader of the underworld. The professor, on learning that he is to kill a man, declines the position, till he is shown some airplane pictures that Serpolis has taken of Rose Crater. After looking at these he determines to go to Rose

Crater at any cost. When Serpolis adds that his daughter went there six years before and shows Kingston her picture, the young man is positive that he should accept the position.

He takes a trip to Washington and learns there that Rose Crater is a Federal prison, created as a last resort to break up crime in the United States. It is owned by the multi-millionaire, Hamford James, who offered it to the Government, free of cost, provided he be allowed to run it as he pleased, without any investigation by the Government. A maximum of one thousand male prisoners are admitted every year, for the duration of their life. Up to this time no convict has ever escaped from this prison.

Kingston returns to New York and takes an apartment in the Bronx. He has another interview with Serpolis, following which he has offers of very lucrative positions and also veiled threats if he does not accept and leave the employ of the gangster. Realizing the danger of his position, he leaves by plane for London to consult the famous entomologist, Spartins, in regard to the pictures of Rose Crater. Arriving in London, he reads of his own death in the crash of a plane owned by Serpolis. This has been cleverly arranged by the gangster to allow the professor to continue his work under the name of Prince.

After great difficulty Prince obtains an interview with Spartins. The old entomologist doubts the truth of the pictures but gives the young professor some very valuable advice.

Back in New York events move rapidly. A state judge is killed and Prince is arrested for the crime. A revolver, cocain and blood money are found in his pockets. As a result, he is given a speedy trial and sentenced to Rose Crater, at which place he arrives on the first of April with nine hundred and ninety-nine other criminals. They are given directions and enter Rose Crater through a long one-way tunnel. Prince and a Yale graduate become acquainted and lead the convicts through this tunnel into the crater.

Once inside, they are astonished to find a large house on one side of the crater. There are a large number of peculiar-shaped huts, arranged in rows, and between these are rows of barrels which show they have been used in the past to hold Louisiana sirup. There are no signs of the prisoners admitted in former years; in fact, the entire crater seems to be devoid of any life except for the thousand convicts.

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9. *The Huts Are Filled*

SLOWLY the men began to seep through the tunnel. No doubt the good old Yale man was going to see them through and be the last to come through Hell Gate. The convicts were a little bewildered; they had expected solitary confinement in the usual prison; but they found comparative liberty and little of the conventional penal atmosphere. They could go as they pleased, and stop when they wanted to. There was not a word said in regard to work, and there were no signs of any factories. The confining walls of the crater were so far apart that it was hard for the men to realize that they were prisoners. It was only when they glanced upward and saw the tremendous heights the crater reached that they had special reason for despair.

As far as their housing was concerned the place was a democracy. Every hut was just like every other hut. The furnishings were all alike: a simple bed, a chair and a table. If two men wanted to become pals, there was nothing against a

bed and a chair being carried from another hut and even a request for double rations being sent down the food-tube. In each hut there was a book-shelf with three books, the same three books in every instance: A Bible, a catalogue of a prominent mail order house, and a book by Fabre, the French naturalist. In most huts the catalogue was worn to tatters while the other two books were as good as new. On the door was a framed direction in regard to the securing of the two daily meals. The mechanism was simple. If a food-can was sent down in the proper manner through the tube, within an hour it would come back, filled with the next meal, but food was not supplied more than twice in the twenty-four hours. Water was sent with the food, otherwise there was no water available. Evidently the convicts were not supposed to wash.

There were no lights in the hut, and, as far as I could see, no heating arrangements of any kind. The entire provision for the care of the convicts seemed to be remarkably crude. It provided for self-service, self-government and self-amusement. The Yale man, who accidentally met me a short time before sundown, mentioned these matters.

"From the standpoint of a psychologist, how long do you think it will take for one man to be boss here?" he asked me.

"Just as long as it will take for the strongest man to find out that he is the strongest," I suggested.

"Mentally the strongest, or physically?"

"A combination of both. While they are finding it out, there is going to be a lot of trouble. Some of these men have been in a little cell for months. This semi-liberty is going to make them intoxicated, and if they don't start fighting among themselves just as soon as the novelty wears off, I am very much mistaken. I thought for a few minutes that the best place for us would be off by ourselves somewhere, but perhaps that might make us too conspicuous. It might be better to be in the middle of everything."

We finally decided to take a hut on the outer row, the far end. By the time we had the two beds and chair in it, it looked a little comfortable. As far as we could judge, the hut had never been occupied. At least, the catalogue was in good condition, though eight years old. I tested the door and found that it could be securely fastened on the inside.

"Lots of odd things about this prison," I commented to the Yale man. "First one I ever saw where the prisoners could lock themselves in from the inside of the cell instead of being locked in from the outside."

"Yes. It is a singular commentary on our modern civilization," the man answered. "And it is rather strange to find you here."

"You mean because I am a college graduate? That's nothing. Lots of us go wrong. I never questioned your being a Yale man, and never even asked why you were here. Perhaps I had better introduce myself. I was sent here under the alias of Prince. For ten thousand dollars I pepped up on cocain and filled a New York judge full of lead. Caught in the act with the revolver in my hand and the money and the cocain in my pocket. A most revolting crime; so here I am. How about that?"

"I have a right to my own opinion. Of course, you are here. I admit that, and of course you were tried and sentenced and all that. But as to your guilt? That is not worrying me. What I want to know is this: whom do you represent?"

I laughed at him as became a Yankee and asked:

"Whom do *you* represent?"

"Check and double check. I have found out what I wanted to know. One thing more. Are we going to work together or separately?"

"That is hard to answer. But let me ask you a question. Have you any inside information about this place? Any suspicions? Any plans of protecting yourself? Do you know what to protect yourself against?"

"Collectively I will answer no to all these questions."

"Then let me give you some advice. We do not know how much food will be served the two of us. We will do as told to and send our names and the number of the hut down the food-tube. From then on, if what that printed form says is true, we will get rations for two men twice a day. We will eat only what we absolutely have to, and save the rest. That may enable you to live longer than the rest, provided you stay inside the hut."

"How about you?"

"I am going out, but you need not worry about that. Perhaps I am protected. But if what I think is true, and I believe it is, you are in a damn tight place."

"No one to blame but myself," he said, cheerfully.

"Maybe that is true, but it is not going to help you.

WE WERE both tired, and it did not take long for us to go to sleep. The hut was either sound-proof or the rest of the convicts were as tired as we were, for the place was unusually quiet. The next morning we followed instructions, took the metal canister off the bookshelf, hunted up the pencil, which was just where it was said to be, wrote our names on the card, put it inside the canister, placed it in the food-tube and pulled a trigger.

Fifteen minutes later the canister came back through the tube. We opened it eagerly. Beans, bread, and a pint of water apiece. We lost no time eating it. Only when it was all gone did I remember my advice of the evening before.

"We should have saved some!" I cried.

"If we had, we would have gone hungry," answered the Yale man. "I am willing to undergo unusual hardships, but I do not want to go hungry. I have always taken particular pride in my body, and I want it in fit shape to serve me when I call on it to do so."

"What is your name?" I asked him, rather sharply.

"Call me King. That tops your Prince. Both are lies, but both will serve. But I am here under that name; so that will have to serve."

"I knew you were here under the name of King," I reminded him. "That was the name we sent down in the food canister, but, somehow, I wanted your real name. You remind me of some one I know rather well, and, somehow, I was hoping that he was a relative of yours. He told me he was a college graduate."

"What place?" asked King sharply.

"He never told me that."

Later on in the day he proposed that we take a walk. We did, over to the other side of the crater.

"Looks as though there had been some kind of mining going on here," remarked King. "Look at all those tunnels into the side there and all that trash at the entrance of each tunnel."

"I am not a geologist," I answered, "but there is something of interest there. The sides of this crater are of some very hard stone. The old volcano tore through

and then nicely filled in all the crevices with lava. The weather of ages has smoothed those sides till they are like glass. Then, probably in the old age of the volcano, it threw up a lot of hot, boiling mud and filled the entire bottom with just plain sand and dirt. It is into that kind of soil those tunnels have been bored. See how round and smooth they are and the kind of stuff that was taken out. Four hundred feet higher it would have taken diamond drills and dynamite to make a hole like that, but in that dry mud a man could almost dig a hole with his hands."

"That may explain where all the convicts have gone," commented the Yale man. "Of course, you have noticed that there are none here except this year's vintage. Perhaps they tried to tunnel through, got so far, were poisoned by some gas and died in the holes they dug."

"For the time being," I laughed, "your guess is as good as mine. I think that you are right about part of it. They probably died in the holes, but I do not think they dug them."

WE ARRANGED to get an early start the next day and walk around the circumference of the crater. There was only one place where there were any signs of volcanic activity. On the extreme edge of the circle, opposite the large house, there was a circuluar hole in the floor of the crater, at least thirty feet in diameter and no telling how deep. A smell of sulfur came from the opening. I was not interested in this but I was in the tracks leading to it from all parts of the crater.

I asked King his opinion.

"Tractors," he commented, "and each tractor dragging something after it and then throwing it down the hole."

"Dragging men? Cemetery?"

"No. Too big for men, not shaped right. Something else."

One more part to the crossword puzzle I was trying to solve. Not entirely clear but partly so.

Neither of us referred to the large house on one side of the crater. We heard the other convicts commenting on it, even suggesting that an effort be made to enter it. No one asked our opinion of such an idea; so we kept quiet. Me! I just knew that no convict or no thousand convicts, or ten thousand, for that matter, could get into that place alive. The man who had found this place, organized it, and run it for all these years was no fool. He knew the type of men the nation was sending to him. He knew what they were and no doubt had planned in a hundred ways to protect himself and his home from them. For I was convinced that he lived in the big house, lived there and directed the activities of all of Rose Crater there. No use trying to get in there after him. But it might be worth while to wait till he came out.

Of course, he would not come out while the convicts were there; if they even suspected who he was, they would tear him to little bits with their hands. He knew that. He was not a fool. So any investigation I should have to make of him would have to be after he came out: and he would not do that till the convicts were gone. Well, I guessed they would go. They had gone in all the other years.

King was unusually gloomy the night after we discovered the hole in the floor of the crater.

"I should like to see Sherlock Holmes tackle this job," he said.

"How about Taine of San Francisco?" I countered.

THAT very night, in the darkness, some of the men came to call on us. Not very pleasant, that kind of visitors,

and I was against opening the door, but King didn't know what fear was; so he walked out and cried,

"What do you boys want?"

"We want you to go with us," explained a voice. "We have had our eye on you, and we want you with us."

"What are you going to do?"

"Going up to the Big House, and kill those we find there. That is the way to get out of here. The people up there know the secret."

King laughed.

"Do you think they are going to tell you? Or let you get near them? This prison has run for some years, and I guess the house has been there all the time and the same man in it. Do you think he is going to sit there and let you come and kill him? Do you think that the man who had brains enough to plan all this, and work out every detail, is foolish enough to let you walk into his house and kill him?"

They said they were going to try it; so we said good-night to them and went to bed. The next morning we walked over by the Big House, and there on the sand were ten bodies. We went and examined them and they had not a mark on them, no blood or wound of any kind. King straightened up and looked at the silent house, the Big House by the side of the crater.

"They ought to have known better," he said.

"At that, they had an easy death. Perhaps they are better off."

During the day little groups of curious convicts came over to look at the bodies. No attempt was made to bury them.

But after that no more attempts were made to raid and loot the Big House; at least, not till the men became desperate.

10. A Real King

BY THE middle of April the convicts were showing their real natures. Between them they were possessed of every vice ever known to the human race. To aid them there was food, of good quality and in fair amount, a modified form of liberty, absolutely no restrictions of any form on their conduct. To hinder them, there was neither tobacco, liquor nor women.

A thousand tigers in such an environment might have finally adjusted themselves. These human tigers only irritated themselves and each other. It seemed that the worst part of our life was the absence of anything definite to do. There was intense need of a social worker, an occupational therapist, to teach these men how to pass the time. A man could not pass the daylight hours, day after day, just looking at a mail order catalogue!

So they started to annoy one another, and from there it went to teasing and tormenting the weaker ones. Childish things, such as throwing sand in their faces, or spoiling their food, and finally devilish things, sitting on a man and pulling out his hair, three or four at a time.

Gangs began to form. Lines were drawn and the rest of the population told to stay on the other side or risk being killed. The strongest gangs raided the weaker, especially at mealtime, thus securing a double quantity of food. Vice of every kind began to show its multiformed, horrible head, first at night and then openly, on the streets, in broad daylight.

King told me his opinion of it,

"The place is going to the dogs!"

"Correct. But what can you expect?"

"There ought to be some kind of government. Some rules."

"Don't take it so serious, King," I advised. "They are dogs and they have just returned to their vomit. Nothing can help them; so why try?"

"I know a man," he said, "who if he were here would be their boss in a day."

"I do, too. But suppose he were their boss? What kind of a racket would he run here?"

"Racket? I was not thinking of a racket. What I had in mind was just a decent society of some kind."

I could not help laughing.

"What are you?" I asked between my chuckles. "A philanthropist? A sociologist? A new Moses, ready to give these wanderers a new code, a novel ten commandments? They have broken every law of God and man they ever heard of. I believe from what I saw today that they are inventing new laws to break and new vices to whip their jaded senses. What can you do? What can any one do? And what is the use of doing?"

I was in earnest by this time.

"Listen to me, King. You seem to be a decent chap, and I want to save you if I can. Don't get mixed up in this matter. Use all your brains to save your own life. I believe that all these rats are going to be dead in a little while; perhaps we shall be dead too if we are not clever enough to stay alive. We have to think fast. The blow may come at any time."

"What blow? What are you thinking about?"

"Oh! The men die every year. You know that. They are gone. And whatever happened to them is bound to happen to us. Are you saving your food? Is there any way you can get more? You had better. Time may come when the food is going to stop."

He came over to me and placed a hand on my shoulder. His face was pathetic in its wistfulness.

"I wish I could trust you, Prince. You know and I know that we are not like the rest. Perhaps if we were honest with each other, and became real allies, something might be done."

I was tempted to tell him all right then. In another minute we would have been exchanging confidences. But the time was not ripe. Near our hut we heard the noise of the wolf-pack hunting, jeers, yells, hysterical laughter, and above all the sound of men in fear of their lives, high-pitched cries of torment.

"Let's look into this," suggested King.

"Better stay where we are. What can we do against that pack?"

So we went out and joined the mob on the edge of the milling mass. One of the men near us explained it to us,

"We guys were needing sport. We wanted to play football and we didn't have no balls. So we buried five pimps up to their necks in the sand and started to kick their bloody coconuts, and after we kicked so long the blasted things come off."

We saw a head and then another shoot through the air, accompanied by the pop-pop of breaking bones. Blood-crazed men were trying to make touchdowns, while equally frenzied men were trying to snatch the human footballs from their grasp. On one side tireless diggers were making holes to bury new victims in.

KING broke through the ring and threw first one digger and then another backward from his prey.

"Stop!" he said. Just one cold word.

A short, broad-shouldered man, with a face like a monkey, walked up to him.

"What-hell! Who's you?"

"I am the new boss."

The ape started to laugh. He thumbed his nose at King, and then turned to the pack,

"Dis guy dinks he's de boss."

They roared like a lot of laughing hyenas.

"Let's have a showdown," added the ape.

I jumped into the ring alongside of the King,

"Fair play, boys! I don't know this guy very well, but he looks to me like a fighter. Go at him one at a time and the best man wins. Handsome Charlie here thinks he is some scrapper; so let him start."

My suggestion met with a favorable reception. Here were men whose ancestors had roared their delight at the Roman circus, the bare-fisted boxing matches of Merry England. They loved to see a fight, though many of them did not care personally for that kind of a struggle themselves. Now, if it came to taking a few whiffs of cocain or shots of cheap brandy and then going and shooting a man in the back for ten dollars, they were right at home.

"What rules?" asked the man who was going to second the ape.

"Rules?" I sneered. "Rules in Hell? Anything goes, and God help the man who gets down."

Walking over, I whispered to the King,

"Can you make the bluff good?"

He simply smiled.

"Then hit them once and hit them hard," I advised.

I knew that the man was built like a Greek god, but I never thought he had such a torso as he had. Stripped to the waist, his skin was like satin, his hair blond and curly like a woman's, and his muscles were long and smooth. Not a bunch anywhere on his arms or back.

The ape was ugly as an imp from Hell, but he was no coward. He walked right into oblivion. The King hit him once, just once, on the point of the chin, and the man dropped as though a bullet had blasted through his brain. If his jawbone had broken, his mind would have been saved, but the bone held, and the man was never able to talk from that minute and he walked with a limp for the rest of his short life.

"That's Number one," I cried. "Next man!"

It really was not exciting. The next nine men met the same fate. Not all were hit on the chin, but only one blow was used on each opponent.

"How do you feel, King?" I asked, as they dragged out the tenth.

"Fair, except for my hands. Hard to fight with bare fists."

Now there came a pause. It was rather hard to find some one to serve as the next victim. The gang was broken into little groups, talking the matter over, and doing a lot of cursing in our direction. Through the jargon of the underworld, we could hear a demand for the Brainless Wonder.

At last he decided to satisfy that demand. His was a new face, and I could not place him at first. Then it dawned on me. The foreign element in the camp had formed a gang and kept rather close to themselves. This man was evidently their leader.

What dark pit had spawned him? Certainly he had in him the combined blood of Moor, Chinaman, Negro and Tartar. His forehead shot back from his nose, microcephalic, and it was this anatomical peculiarity that must have given him the alias of the Brainless Wonder.

His arms were long, dangling; they reached his knees.

"Don't let him hug you, King. Keep away from him."

"And that is good advice, old man," whispered the King, smiling.

They advanced toward each other, and then the Brainless Wonder turned his back and lashed out his right leg. Had the heavy-booted foot hit the target, the temple, King's skull would have been crushed in like an egg-shell. Fortunately, with a skill born of long experience in the ring, he had dodged the flying missile and received only a glancing blow on the chest.

Without a split second's pause he hurled himself on the back of the Brainless Wonder. It was the Tiger hurling himself on the Hyena. And then, with his arm under the throat, the other hand on the right ankle and his knees in the small of the back, he started to bend the man.

I saw then what I had never expected to see: a college man, with the best culture of the present century, take a wild animal and break his back. Around me came the sharp hiss of deeply drawn breath. That was all, not another sound, and then a sharp crack. We all knew what the sound meant, and the dying man on the sand knew better than any of them.

The King stood up straight. He was unmarked save for the crimson boot-mark on his side. He was not even breathing deeply. Gradually he started to smile.

"Next?" he asked.

Not a man moved. He called for a table. It was brought him.

Up on top of it, with the whole camp listening to him, he made his first and last address.

"I am the new boss. If any man wants the job, he knows how to get it. We are here and it looks as though we were going to stay here, and there is not going to be any more rough stuff like playing football with men's heads. Understand? Any time any of you men don't suit me, I am going to tame you, as I did the Brainless Wonder. If there is anything you are not sure of, you come and ask me first before you do it. Every day I want you to bring me the food of this dying man. He won't need it after to-day, and I do. And bring me some water, right away, now. You can't handle dirt without soiling your hands."

Right there, on the table, he took the precious water and washed himself. The pack knew the new boss.

11. The Sugar Barrels Fill

ACCORDING to our tally it was the first of May. Life in Rose Crater was very much the same, day by day. King was occupied with his affairs as the new boss, while I spent several days investigating the quarry holes at the other side of the crater. They were big enough to walk upright in, and, though it was dark and I had no light, the sides were smooth enough and the floor level enough to make it possible to walk in some distance without danger. It was even possible to go into the first of the side galleries, and I found there what I expected to. By putting all my force into it I was even able to drag my find out to the open. Leaving it there, I went to bring King and show it to him, but before I could do so the pack had found my find and gruesomely torn it to pieces, tossed the parts to the four winds and gone on, just like a gang of hoodlum children. So there was nothing to show King after all.

On our way back from the region of the quarry holes we passed a number of barrels. I looked into one and found it half-full of liquid, brown and sticky. My tasting it showed me that it was filling with cane sirup. The other barrels were the same.

When I called King's attention to it, he expressed surprize,

"Evidently the boys are going to be sweetened up."

"Yes, there is nothing to prevent them from drinking all of it they want to. It is a good food, but they will soon tire of it."

"What is the idea?"

"Not sure, but believe they are just substitutes for flowers."

King laughed at that.

"You mean that a man who thought out all the details for this place would go to the trouble to feed a lot of insects?"

"That's it. No flowers here. If he wants to attract insects, he has to feed them, and most insects live on sugar."

"I haven't seen anything except those cursed ants."

"He evidently expects some. Sugar barrels dry and empty part of the year. First of May he fills the barrels up. Must be expecting something."

"But there are hundreds of those barrels, regular hogsheads."

"He must expect lots of insects."

That night I decided to tell him the story. Any way he reacted to it I would have a friend and an ally. It was near the point when I had to confide in some one, and it seemed to me that we had too many things in common to remain suspicious of each other any longer.

He listened to me tell the story. I did not try to hide anything, told it all from the time I answered the advertisement up to the time I met him at the first of the rat-traps in the tunnel. I have no way of telling how long I talked, but he did not interrupt me once, not even when I told him about Happy, little Joan. I ended with,

"Of course, I am here primarily because I am an entomologist, but my second big reason is the little girl. Serpolis showed me her picture and there was something about her that appealed to me. I have not the least reason to think that she is still alive, but if she is, she is in the big house. I think that I am going to find out before I finish. In fact, I have to find out to finish the job. Serpolis has to know. He said it was the uncertainty of the whole thing that was killing him."

"You think that you are right in your surmises?"

"Practically sure of it, King. Everything is fitting together. For example, here are the sugar barrels. And then that skeleton I pulled out, the one I wanted you to see. Of course, it is all unbelievable. Spartins said it was not true, but at the same time he admitted there were many interesting points to my story. And I am not sure that he knew about the large number of beef cattle that were shipped to the crater every year, before the convicts came. Now, if I could find a skeleton of a steer."

"It's all wrong," argued King. "I mean the civilization that permits the existence of such a place is all wrong. Of course, I admit that there may be a thousand criminals every year who are bad enough to warrant their being sent to solitary confinement, but to simply send them into a place like this without any government supervision and in the power of one man, makes for an intolerable situation."

"No doubt you are right, but it won't do any good to talk about it just now; and it won't help us any out of the situation we are facing, which, to my viewpoint, is just about as dangerous as it can be. How much food have you in reserve?"

"Enough to last the two of us for a month."

"That will be enough to last you for twice that long. You may have to depend on the sirup for water. Not so bad. The specific gravity is about 1034. May nauseate you, but it will get you by."

"How about yourself?"

"I don't know. I am going to see the thing through when the time comes. I have protection; just how well it will work is a question, but one of us has to go through with it and come out alive, if it is at all possible to do so. If little Joan is still here, we have to do something to get her out."

The King frowned,

"The poor little girl must have had a hard time of it. It might have been better for her to have died right away than live on at the big house. You understand that I am as much interested in her as you are, and perhaps more so."

"How's that?"

"Easy enough. She is my sister."

12. King Tells His Story

"THAT explains it," I exclaimed.

"What?"

"Your resemblance to your father, Serpolis."

"I guess there is a family resemblance. Of course, I have been on my own for a long time. In fact, I have not seen Dad for ages. How was he when you saw him last?"

"Very well, except for his worry over Joan."

"Never mentioned that he had a son?"

"No. Not once."

"Not to be wondered at. Of course, I know now that he is, or was, the great American boss, as far as crime is concerned, but he took care that his two children should be shielded from that knowledge. All the time I was going through Yale I read of Serpolis and hated him as the great American Public Enemy, never once suspecting that he was my father. The little girl, Happy, was reared the same way. Simply knew her dad as a mythical all-good father, who sent her checks, whether she needed them or not. I don't know how they got Joan. In fact, I did not know they had her till she had been here three years. I think that she was framed in some way, found out that Dad's life was the price of her release and refused to talk. Of course, she knew that Dad was mixed up in something bad, but she thought it was blackmail. I honestly do not believe she knows today that Serpolis is our father. I found it out three years ago. I had been away from the States on a four-year hunting-trip in South America. When I came back, Joan was gone. It cost a lot of money, but at last I met a man who told me that Serpolis could tell me all about Joan. Imagine it! I went to my own father and threatened to kill him if he did not tell me where Happy was. Was the old man a Roman? I'll tell the world he was. And it ended up in my learning that he was my father and that Joan had been sent here some months after I sailed for South America. It was a shame the way I talked to him, but when we finished, we understood each other.

"He told me that he couldn't help it. It wasn't that the rival gang was any richer or more powerful than he was; it was simply the fact that the public psychology was against him. He had even gone to the President and asked for a pardon, but the President had told him that if he pardoned even one convict sentenced to Rose Crater, he would be impeached. Dad claims that he told him that the one he was asking pardon for was a woman, and urged the President to investigate it, but that statement was just thought to be one more bluff to kill time.

"From the year I graduated from Yale, I had spent all my time hunting big game; so I told Dad that I was going to keep on and never rest till the moment

came when I found Happy, and, dead or alive, I was going to kill the man who was responsible for it. Here's hoping that Hamford James will soon be a dead man."

"You mean the owner of this prison?'

"None other. If Happy is dead, he killed her. If she is alive, he is keeping her a prisoner. Where? It must be at the big house. Where else could it be? Where else in the crater could he stay? I get frantic at times and make up my mind to go there and see."

"Yes, and die right away. What chance have you? None whatever."

"I suppose so."

"So you deliberately came here of your own accord?"

"That is right. Became a public enemy. Insulted the nation, spit at the judge. A tough guy who would stop at nothing. That's me every day after they caught me. South Carolina was glad to add me to the list."

"I guess there is nothing to do except to wait."

"That's all, but it is not easy waiting."

13. The First Males Appear

I SUGGESTED to King that we move our residence and take a hut on the far edge of the colony nearest in a bee-line to the ledge of sand with the many tunnels in it. Whenever anything happened, this would give us a chance to be among the first to see it. We moved on the night of the tenth of May. We had a surplus of provisions which we had hidden carefully in our mattresses, and I also suggested that we take a few extra catalogues.

Thus, on the tenth of May we were located in our new home and taking turns at guard duty. The hut we selected was just twenty feet from one of the sirup barrels, an idea that had come to me during the long, wakeful hours of the night.

It was King who had the thrill of seeing the first one. He called to me in great excitement,

"Something is coming through the air from the tunnels, Prince, and it looks like a baby airplane."

"Better come inside, King, and watch it through the glass door. I do not think it will be dangerous, but there is no use in taking any chances," I advised.

As luck would have it, the airplane came right to the sirup barrel near our hut, and poised there, started to drink the sirup. It was an insect at least twelve feet long, rusty red velvet to the waist and below that gleaming black, marked with pale yellow crescents. The long legs were tan-colored and the wings russet.

"Well?" asked the King, in harsh aspiration.

"That," I whispered in reply, "is the male of the *Sphecius Speciosus*, otherwise known as the giant sand-wasp. John Burroughs, in 1879, devoted four pages of his *Notes by the Way* to this hornet. It is one of the digger wasps, and its favorite food is the cicada.

"Various naturalists have written about it: Gibson, Savin and Riley. Normally it grows to a length of one and a half inches. So this male is about one hundred times the usual size."

"But look at that one suck in the sugar!" he said. " I thought you said they ate cicadas, or whatever you call them."

"They do, at one time of their life. These males are harmless, just play boys of the insect world. I understand they come out about four days before the females. That gives us four days more of life."

"You mean that they will eat just the sugar for four days?"

"Oh! The adults keep on eating the

sugar. Look, there comes another, and another! Big birds, aren't they? They won't eat us; but it's death just the same, and a rather horrible form of death, too. I wonder what the boys are thinking about. What difference does it make what they think? What difference does it make what any one thinks? The part that interests me is this man Hamford James. There is a man for your careful analysis. Of course, he was a rich man to start with, but he had an idea, and he follows up that idea, month by month, step by step, year by year. I don't know his secret, but he succeeded in doing what every scientist has longed to do. Instead of a little laboratory, he uses a dead volcano. He has every minutest detail planned, and even goes so far as to take advantage of a national emergency to furnish him with supplies. I hate and despise the man, without even seeing him, but I have to admit that in many ways he is a wonder. He knows that some day an entomologist will start to investigate his work; so he creates college jobs and bureau positions for the entomologists as fast as they graduate. He—there comes another, and another—and, just as I expected, here come the convicts. They are worried over the new developments and want advice from their boss."

EVIDENTLY the rats thought there was safety in numbers, for they came milling up in a close mass. Their fears were groundless, for the wasps paid no attention to them. All they seemed to want to do was to drink the cane sirup and dart here and there through the air.

King and I came out of our hut.

"What is the trouble, boys?" the boss asked.

"It's these damn bugs, boss. We don't know about them and we thought perhaps you did. What does it mean?" asked the spokesman.

"I don't know, boys. But it seems these bugs live here and raise a new crop every year. These pretty fellows have just come out of their cocoons. They won't hurt you, just eat the sugar."

"Who is back of it all? What does it mean?"

"I suppose Hamford James is. He is the man who owns the crater and takes care of us for the Government."

That kept them talking for a while, in little groups, just a few of the brighter ones doing the talking and the rest listening; and then one of them came to the front for another conference with the boss.

"This James man. Where does he live?"

"I don't know, but I suppose in the big house."

"He's back of it?"

"Of everything in Rose Crater."

"Suppose you go and see him."

"No."

"Why not?"

"No use."

"Suppose we send some of the boys?"

"Go ahead, but it won't do any good. You remember that one night ten men went to loot the big house and they were all killed."

That mention of the lost ten set them mad. It must have been the madness of desperation rather than any love they had for their lost comrades. At any rate, they decided that things would be different in the daytime and picked out a committee of five to go and talk to Hamford James.

The boss and I walked by ourselves, a little to the left of the large group.

"I am not sure," he whispered to me, "but I think there go five men who will soon be dead."

"They all will be dead anyway in a

few days, so why worry? Still, I am interested. First, because something like this has happened with each group of convicts, and second, because I may want to get into the big house myself some day and I want to know what the reason is for not doing it. I want some other man to show me. I do not feel like experimenting with Hamford James."

The five men walked on, and on. Now they were within fifty feet of the big house. In fact, we were all near enough to it to make a rather close study of it. It looked a little like a castle; only it was made out of glass and seemed to have a lot of windows in it. There was no apparent reason why any one should not walk up and ring the front door bell. No sign of light or life; just a well-built, tenantless house.

Then, without warning, the five men who were to interview the owner of Rose Crater crumpled up and dropped in their tracks. They jerked a little, and a peculiar blue smoke came out of their mouths. Some of the audience started to run, but most of them stood their ground, looking appealingly to the boss.

"That is your answer," he remarked. "The same thing would happen to any one or all of us. Electricity or something. Hamford James is too smart a man to trust himself here in the crater with us boys without protection. Only thing I can advise you to do is to get back to your huts as soon as you can, go inside and lock the door and stay there."

That is what they did, and without losing any time doing so. But the five dead men just kept still on the sand.

14. And Then Some Ladies

WE WALKED back to our hut, shut the door and locked it. The King started to investigate his mattress.

"Just as I thought," he sighed. "One of our friends suspected something and raided our reserve supply of food. All gone."

"That is just too bad," I commented. "Leaves us with nothing but the catalogues, and we won't know how to use them till the killing begins. Wish we could get into the big house. If we got Hamford James in the right kind of a grip, he might be willing to come clean."

"No use wishing that. We may get the man in our grip, but not in the big house, not now. Anyway, he is still feeding us—and what meals! The breakfast was wonderful."

"There is a method in his madness. He wants us fat and succulent. Nourishing and appetizing titbits for his little ones. It nauseates me. Tonight the lights are shining on Broadway. People are praying, fighting, gambling and drinking by the millions, and here we are, destined to a sorrier fate than ever came to any thousand men."

The supper that night was good—a Chinese dish, hot, nourishing and abundant. I locked the door and tried to sleep on a full stomach. Overhead was the constant drone of mighty wings.

Morning came at last. Our pets were still around the sugar barrels. And the men were still in their huts.

I suggested to King that we take the catalogues and arrange some kind of a harness to protect the back of our necks. Three books on top of one another would stop a bullet.

"Bet it works!" cried King. He was always an optimistic, cheerful fellow. "I have been watching them drink the sirup, and their stinger seems to be rather soft and flexible. Bet they couldn't bore through one of these catalogues, let alone three of them."

I had to laugh at him.

"You may be a big game hunter, but you are a bum entomologist."

"Why?"

"Because they don't sting with that end, and these males don't sting much with either end. It is the female that gives the death blow, and so far I have not seen one."

But the very next day I saw the first lady of the tribe, quite similar in coloring and shape, but at least a third larger. She went through the air to the nearest sugar barrel with an assurance and arrogance that told only too well of her confidence and power. Several males tried to court her, but when she hurled her powerful body at them, they turned tail and fled in a most unmasculine and precipitous manner.

The darting males gathered in little groups.

"Mating season is on," I cried to King. "Here come the brides, and they are right pretty little love-mates at that, are they not? They will have their little season of love-making, and then the males will die while the females start in to housekeeping; and when their houses are finished, then the fun will begin. The ancestors of this brood were given steers to feed their children with. These ladies will have no trouble at all with grown men. Not even with big men like you."

The boss examined one of the ladies who had stopped to drink out of a sugar barrel near our hut.

"You say that they sting with the other end?"

"Yes."

"Why, that dame could bore a hole through a battleship with that drill! I wish I had one of my elephant-guns with me."

"Would be handy. Watch her."

A male came up and stood in front of the lady wasp. He took the paws of his front legs and rubbed the eyes of the female, twisting her head, first to one side and then to another. Then with his antennæ he started to stroke her body with a slow caressing motion. It must have worked, for they soared up into the air for the mating flight.

"We are seeing something that no one has ever seen before," exclaimed King.

"Wrong!" I corrected him. "Seven thousand, five hundred convicts have seen it before, and I have seen it a hundred times; only then the wasps were little things, about an inch and a half long. Now we are advancing with the story. The male mates and dies. His work is done, so why should he live on? The female starts in digging a new tunnel, and in that tunnel she lays her eggs; and that is where we come in, you and I and the other convicts."

"But they can not get us, so long as we stay in the hut."

"No. But are we going to stay?"

"I believe so."

"I believe not. I have my own idea about that."

"You mean?"

"Just that."

"Of course, that would make it different. A man would take chances. It would all depend. If it were a fifty-fifty gamble a man might try it."

THE next morning my worst suspicions proved to be correct. The food-canister went down as usual with two names on the cards. In no time at all the canister came back, empty, save for a printed slip which read,

"From now on no more meals will be served inside the huts. Ample food will be available three times a day on the circular food hoist which can be found at the far end of the first row of huts."

"In other words," I said to King, "right beyond our front door."

15. *Desperate Men*

THE message was delivered at the same time to all the convicts. Not so many now. Five had been killed in the football game, and ten had died that night in front of the big house, and five more had died there with all of us watching, and the Brainless Wonder had died with a broken back, and that left nine hundred and seventy-nine. They had been fed in a special way for a month. Now they had to learn to get their food in a new way, and that was not so easy.

King and I walked over to the delivery platform. We had never noticed it before, covered as it was with the wind-blown dirt of months, but now it appeared as a polished circular table of metal, about twenty feet in diameter, enclosed in a cuff, one foot wide. It was all perfectly simple. The platform traveled up and down inside the cuff. It was loaded with food at the bottom, raised to the top, and dinner was served.

"I don't like Hamford James at all," I remarked, "but I have to admire his cleverness as an inventor. He also had a very good idea of the psychology of a hungry man."

"You mean it is a trap?"

"Precisely. You note that he is handling a thousand desperate men with little or no help. He really is making them handle themselves. They are in these little huts, and it would take an army to drive them out—if they wanted to stay in. But they are going to want food; so he places the food, and no doubt it will be very nice food, right out in the open, on that platform. In order to get the food, they will have to leave their huts. And then buzzzzz."

"I understand," sighed King. "Especially the buzzzzz part. All the more reason why I want to lay my hands on that man."

"I, too; but when I do, I don't want any mistakes made. You know I came here to rescue Happy."

"She is dead by this time," he said gloomily.

"She may be, but so long as I don't know it, I am going to think that she is alive."

All that morning there was a gradual shifting of the convicts. The main details about the new way of serving the food had spread, and every one wanted to be as close as possible to the steel platform. Three and even four men were occupying the same hut. At high noon a whistle blew and in a little while up came the platform, loaded with bread, cheese and large galvanized cans of hot soup. There was considerable fighting before the food was distributed, and, no doubt, some of the men went hungry. King and I did not go over. We wanted to see what would happen. In no time at all the food was all gone and the men were back in their huts.

The wasps were rather plentiful by this time. More females. Evidently the males did not live long after mating. We could see their dead bodies, huge, unsightly and not at all good to smell, legs in the air, studding the sandy floor of the crater. The females kept flying around, drinking lots of the cane sirup but not offering to do any harm to the convicts.

Two more days passed and then the wasps disappeared.

"LET's take a walk, King," I proposed. "Tomorrow will be too late. I want to add one more fact to the evidence we have already accumulated."

"Where are you going?"

"Over to the sand-hills, where the old

tunnels are. Ought to be lots of life there by this time."

"Safe?"

"Today, yes. Tomorrow, no. May be too bad today. But we must see what the females are doing. Better put your catalogue armor on over your neck."

"Good advice, but I doubt if it would help any."

We walked across the crater to the sand-hills on the other side. Even from the distance of a half-mile the dust of activity could be seen. Closer to the hill we saw the reason for all this dust. The digger wasps were making their tunnels.

One near us had just started in to dig. She made several experimental holes, then, sure of her location, started to work in earnest. Using her forefeet as rakes, she soon scraped out enough of the dirt to make a hole large enough to admit her body. Then she turned over, lay flat on her back and worked on the ceiling of the cave with her legs. From then on the building of the tunnel was rapid work. In no time at all she was out of sight, but the dirt was coming out by the bushel and her deep grunts told of the speed with which she was working. Every few minutes she came to dump dirt out of the mouth of the shaft, and finally, when the dirt made too large a pile at the mouth of the tunnel, she came out and threw ton after ton up into the air.

All the females were similarly occupied. Occasionally one would leave her work to get a meal of cane sirup, but the big thing in their lives seemed to be the making of the tunnel.

"This is why they are called solitary wasps," I explained to King. "Each female has her own tunnel. The yellow-jackets live in a community house, built of paper, but these digger wasps are very individualistic."

"Is she making the tunnel to live in?"

"No. She is preparing a home for the next generation. She lays her eggs there, and then she dies. Her husband is already dead. In a few weeks these giant wasps will be dead unless Hamford James has a means of prolonging their lives, which I doubt. But in each of these tunnels will be the eggs of the next generation, which will finally become full-grown adult *Sphecius.*"

"Then for a while, nearly ten months, the only hope of survival these giants have is in the tunnels?"

"That's it. Go on. Use dynamite on them, fill the tunnels with poison gases, destroy the new brood in any way you can imagine, but be sure it is practical before you start anything. In the meantime, let us go back to the hut. One or two of these tunnels look as though they are nearly through, and when that stage of the play is reached, it is going to be unfortunate for a man found outside a hut."

WE WALKED rapidly back. In fact, we ran the last two hundred yards, filled with a sense of impending danger. One wasp was circling over the huts, several more were leaving the tunnels to join her. Out of breath, we reached our hut, tumbled in and locked the door.

Then the whistle blew for the noonday meal. We thought it best to go without that meal, but the rest of the convicts were hungry. The food was fairly good. When the platform reached the top they rushed over to it.

Then from the sky the twenty-foot female wasps, the giant *Sphecius speciosus* came down like airplanes making a nose-dive. The events of the next minute came too quickly to watch each detail, but before the scattered group of convicts realized what had happened, the hunting wasps were off through the air, each with

(Please turn to page 271)

The Witchcraft of Ulua

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

A bizarre and fantastic tale of the weird sendings of a wicked woman, and the luckless youth who became entangled in her toils

SABMON the anchorite was famed no less for his piety than for his prophetic wisdom and knowledge of the dark art of sorcery. He had dwelt alone for two generations in a curious house on the rim of the northern desert of Tasuun: a house whose floor and walls were built from the large bones of dromedaries, and whose roof was a wattling composed of the smaller bones of wild dogs and men and hyenas. These ossuary relics, chosen for their whiteness and symmetry, were bound securely together with well-tanned thongs, and were joined and fitted with marvelous closeness, leaving no space for the blown sand to penetrate. This house was the pride of Sabmon, who swept it daily with a besom of mummy's hair, till it shone immaculate as polished ivory both within and without.

Despite his remoteness and reclusion, and the hardships that attended a journey to his abode, Sabmon was much consulted by the people of Tasuun, and was even sought by pilgrims from the farther shores of Zothique. However, though not ungracious or inhospitable, he often ignored the queries of his visitors, who, as a rule, wished merely to divine the future or to ask advice concerning the most advantageous government of their affairs. He became more and more taciturn with age, and spoke little with men in his last years. It was said, perhaps not untruly, that he preferred to talk with the murmuring palms about his well, or the wandering stars that went over his hermitage.

In the summer of Sabmon's ninety-third year, there came to him the youth Amalzain, his great-nephew, and the son of a niece that Sabmon had loved dearly in days before his retirement to a gymnosophic seclusion. Amalzain, who had spent all of his one-and-twenty years in the upland home of his parents, was on his way to Miraab, the capital of Tasuun, where he would serve as a cup-bearer to Famorgh the king. This post, obtained for him by influential friends of his father, was much coveted among the youth of the land, and would lead to high advancement if he were fortunate enough to win the king's favor. In accord with his mother's wish, he had come to visit Sabmon and to ask the counsel of the sage regarding various problems of worldly conduct.

Sabmon, whose eyes were undimmed by age and astronomy and much poring over volumes of archaic ciphers, was pleased with Amalzain and found in the boy something of his mother's beauty. And for this reason he gave freely of his hoarded wisdom; and, after uttering many profound and pertinent maxims, he said to Amalzain:

"It is indeed well that you have come to me: for, innocent of the world's turpitude, you fare to a city of strange sins and strange witcheries and sorceries. There are numerous evils in Miraab. Its women are witches and harlots, and their beauty is a foulness wherein the young, the strong, the valiant, are limed and taken."

Then, ere Amalzain departed, Sabmon

gave to him a small amulet of silver, graven curiously with the migniard skeleton of a girl. And Sabmon said:

"I counsel you to wear this amulet at all times henceforward. It contains a pinch of ashes from the pyre of Yos Ebni, sage and archimage, who won supremacy over men and demons in elder years by defying all mortal temptation and putting down the insubordination of the flesh. There is a virtue in these ashes, and they will protect you from such evils as were overcome by Yos Ebni. And yet, peradventure, there are ills and enchantments in Miraab from which the amulet can not defend you. In such case you must return to me. I shall watch over you carefully, and shall know all that occurs to you in Miraab: for I have long since become the owner of certain rare faculties of sight and hearing whose exercise is not debarred or limited by mere distance."

Amalzain, being ignorant of the matters at which Sabmon hinted, was somewhat bewildered by this peroration. But he received the amulet gratefully. Then, bidding Sabmon a reverential farewell, he resumed his journey to Miraab, wondering much as to the fortune that would befall him in that sinful and many-legended city.

2

FAMORGH, who had grown old and senile amid his debaucheries, was the ruler of an aging, semi-desert land; and his court was a place of far-sought luxury, of obliquitous refinement and corruption. The youth Amalzain, accustomed only to the simple manners, the rude virtues and vices of country-dwelling folk, was dazzled at first by the sybaritic life around him. But a certain innate strength of character, fortified by the moral teachings of his parents and the precepts of his great-uncle, Sabmon, preserved him from any grave errors or lapses.

Thus it was that he served as a cupbearer at bachannalian revels, but remained abstemious throughout, pouring night after night in the ruby-crusted cup of Famorgh the maddening wines that were drugged with cannabis and the stupefying arrack with its infusion of poppy. With untainted heart and flesh he beheld the infamous mummeries whereby the courtiers, vying with each other in shamelessness, attempted to lighten the king's ennui. Feeling only wonder or disgust, he watched the nimble and lascivious contortions of black dancers from Dooza Thom in the north, or saffron-bodied girls from the southern isles. His parents, who believed implicitly in the superhuman goodness of monarchs, had not prepared him for this spectacle of royal vice; but the reverence they had instilled so thoroughly into Amalzain led him to regard it all as being the peculiar but mysterious prerogative of the kings of Tasuun.

During his first month in Miraab, Amalzain heard much of the Princess Ulua, sole daughter of Famorgh and Queen Lunalia; but since the women of the royal family seldom attended the banquets or appeared in public, he did not see her. The huge and shadowy palace, however, was filled with whispers concerning her amours. Ulua, he was told, had inherited the sorceries of her mother Lunalia, whose dark, luxurious beauty, so often sung by bewitched poets, was now fallen to a haggish decrepitude. The lovers of Ulua were innumerable, and she often procured their passion or insured their fidelity by other charms than those of her person. Though little taller than a child, she was exquisitely formed and endowed with the loveliness of some fe-

male demon that might haunt the slumbers of youth. She was feared by many and her ill will was deemed a dangerous thing. Famorgh, no less blind to her sins and witcheries than he had been to those of Lunalia, indulged her in all ways and denied her nothing.

Amalzain's duties left him much idle time, for Famorgh usually slept the double sleep of age and intoxication after the evening revels. Much of this time he gave to the study of algebra and the reading of olden poems and romances. One morning, while he was engaged with certain algebraic calculations, there came to Amalzain a huge negress who had been pointed out to him as one of Ulua's waiting-women. She told him peremptorily that he was to follow her to the apartments of Ulua. Bewildered and amazed by this singular interruption of his studies, he was unable to reply for a moment. Thereupon, seeing his hesitation, the great black woman lifted him in her naked arms and carried him easily from the room and through the palace halls. Angry, and full of discomfiture, he found himself deposited in a chamber hung with shameless designs, where, amid the fuming of aphrodisiac vapors, the princess regarded him with luxurious gravity from a couch of fire-bright scarlet. She was small as a woman of the elf-folk, and voluptuous as a coiled lamia. The incense floated about her like sinuous veils.

"There are other things than the pouring of wine for a sottish monarch, or the study of worm-eaten volumes," said Ulua in a voice that was like the flowing of hot honey. "Sir cup-bearer, your youth should have a better employment than these."

"I ask no employment, other than my duties and studies," replied Amalzain ungraciously. "But tell me, O princess, what is your will? Why has your serving-woman brought me here in a fashion so unseemly?"

"For a youth so erudite and clever, the question should be needless," answered Ulua, smiling obliquely. "See you not that I am beautiful and desirable? Or can it be that your perceptions are duller than I had thought?"

"I do not doubt that you are beautiful," said the boy, "but such matters hardly concern an humble cup-bearer."

The vapors, mounting thickly from golden thuribles before the couch, were parted with a motion as of drawn draperies; and Amalzain lowered his gaze before the enchantress, who shook with a soft laughter that made the jewels upon her bosom twinkle like living eyes.

"It would seem that those musty volumes have indeed blinded you," she told him. "You have need of that euphrasy which purges the sight. Go now: but return presently—of your own accord."

For many days thereafter, Amalzain, going about his duties as usual, was aware of a strange haunting. It seemed now that Ulua was everywhere. Appearing at the revels, as if by some new caprice, she flaunted her evil beauty in the eyes of the young cup-bearer; and often, by day, he met her in the palace gardens and corridors. All men spoke of her, as if conspiring tacitly to keep her in his thoughts; and it seemed that even the heavy arrases whispered her name as they rustled in the lost winds that wandered through the gloomy and interminable halls.

This, however, was not all: for her undesired image began to trouble his nightly dreams; and awakening, he heard the warm, dulcet languor of her voice, and felt the caress of light and subtle fingers in the darkness. Peering at the pale

moon that waxed beyond the windows, above the black cypresses, he saw her dead, corroded face assume the living features of Ulua. The lithe and migniard form of the young witch appeared to move among the fabulous queens and goddesses that thronged the opulent hangings with their amours. Beheld as if through enchantment, her face leaned beside his in the mirrors; and she came and vanished, phantom-like, with seductive murmurs and wanton gestures, as he bent over his books. But though he was perturbed by these appearances, in which he could scarce distinguish the real from the illusory, Amalzain was still indifferent toward Ulua, being surely protected from her charms by the amulet containing the ashes of Yos Ebni, saint and sage and archimage. From certain curious flavors detected more than once in his food and drink, he suspected that the love-potions for which she had become infamous were being administered to him; but beyond a light and passing qualmishness, he experienced no ill effect whatever; and he was wholly ignorant of the spells woven against him in secret, and the thrice-lethal invultuations that were designed to wound his heart and senses.

Now (though he knew it not) his indifference was a matter of much gossip at the court. Men marvelled greatly at such exemption: for all whom the princess had chosen heretofore, whether captains, cup-bearers or high dignitaries, or common soldiers and grooms, had yielded easily to her bewitchments. So it came to pass that Ulua was angered, since all men knew that her beauty was scorned by Amalzain, and her sorcery was impotent to ensnare him. Thereupon she ceased to appear at the revels of Famorgh; and Amalzain beheld her no longer in the halls and gardens; and neither his dreams nor his waking hours were haunted any more by the spell-wrought semblance of Ulua. So, in his innocence, he rejoiced as one who has encountered a grave peril and has come forth unharmed.

Then, later, on a moonless night, as he lay sleeping tranquilly in the moonless hours before dawn, there came to him in his dream a figure muffled from crown to heel with the vestments of the tomb. Tall as a caryatid, awful and menacing, it leaned above him in silence more malignant than any curse; and the cerements fell open at the breast, and charnel-worms and death-scarabs and scorpions, together with shreds of rotting flesh, rained down upon Amalzain. Then, as he awoke from his nightmare, sick and stifled, he breathed a carrion fetor, and felt against him the pressure of a still, heavy body. Affrighted, he rose and lit the lamp; but the bed was empty. Yet the odor of putrefaction still lingered; and Amalzain could have sworn that the corpse of a woman, two weeks dead and teeming with maggots, had lain closely at his side in the darkness.

Thereafter, for many nights, his slumbers were broken by such foulnesses as this. Hardly could he sleep at all for the horror of that which came and went, invisible but palpable, in his chamber. Always he awoke from ill dreams, to find about him the stiffened arms of long-dead succubi, or to feel at his side the amorous trembling of fleshless skeletons. He was choked by the natron and bitumen of mummied breasts; he was crushed by the unremoving weight of gigantic liches; he was kissed nauseously by lips that were oozing tatters of corruption.

Nor was this all; for other abominations came to him by day, visible, and perceived through all his senses, and more loathsome even than the dead.

Things that seemed as the leavings of leprosy crawled before him at high noon in the halls of Famorgh; and they rose up from the shadows and sidled toward him, leering whitely with faces that were no longer faces, and trying to caress him with their half-eaten fingers. About his ankles, as he went to and fro, there clung lascivious empusæ with breasts that were furred like the bat; and serpent-bodied lamiæ minced and pirouetted before his eyes, like the dancers before the king.

No longer could he read his books or solve his problems of algebra in peace: for the letters changed from moment to moment beneath his scrutiny and were twisted into runes of evil meaning; and the signs and ciphers he had written were turned into devils no bigger than large emmets, that writhed foully across the paper as if on a field, performing those rites which are acceptable only to Alila, queen of perdition and goddess of all iniquities.

Thus plagued and bedevilled, the youth Amalzain was near to madness; yet he dared not complain or speak to others of aught that he beheld; for he knew that these horrors, whether immaterial or substantial, were perceived only by himself. Nightly, for the full period of a moon, he lay with dead things in his chamber; and daily, in all his comings and goings, he was besought by abhorrent specters. And he doubted not that all these were the sendings of Ulua, angered by his refusal of her love; and he remembered that Sabmon had hinted darkly of certain enchantments from which the ashes of Yos Ebni, preserved in the silver amulet, might be powerless to defend him. And, knowing that such enchantments were upon him now, he recalled the final injunction of the old archimage.

So, feeling that there was no help for him save in the wizardry of Sabmon, he went before King Famorgh and begged a short leave of absence from the court. And Famorgh, who was well pleased with the cup-bearer, and moreover had begun to note his thinness and pallor, granted the request readily.

Mounted on a palfrey chosen for speed and endurance, Amalzain rode northward from Miraab on a sultry morning in autumn. A strange heaviness had stilled all the air; and great coppery clouds were piled like towering, many-domed palaces of genii on the desert hills. The sun appeared to swim in molten brass. No vultures flew on the silent heavens; and the very jackals had retired to their lairs, as if in fear of some unknown doom. But Amalzain, riding swiftly toward Sabmon's hermitage, was haunted still by leprous larvæ that rose before him, posturing foully on the dun sands; and he heard the desirous moaning of succubi under the hooves of his horse.

The night waylaid him, airless and starless, as he came to a well amid dying palms. Here he lay sleepless, with the curse of Ulua still upon him: for it seemed that the dry, dusty liches of desert tombs reclined rigidly at his side; and bony fingers wooed him toward the unfathomable sand-pits from which they had risen.

WEARY and devil-ridden, he reached the wattled house of Sabmon at noon of the next day. The sage greeted him affectionately, showing no surprize, and listened to his story with the air of one who harkens a twice-told tale.

"These things, and more, were known to me from the beginning," he said to Amalzain. "I could have saved you from the sendings of Ulua ere now; but it was my wish that you should come to me at this time, forsaking the court of the dotard Famorgh and the evil city of

Miraab, whose iniquities are now at the full. The imminent doom of Miraab, though unread by her astrologers, has been declared in the heavens; and I would not that you should share the doom.

"It is needful," he went on, "that the spells of Ulua should be broken on this very day, and the sendings returned to her that sent them; since otherwise they would haunt you for ever, remaining as a visible and tangible plague when the witch herself has gone to her black lord, Thasaidon, in the seventh hell."

Then, to the wonderment of Amalzain, the old magician brought forth from a cabinet of ivory an elliptic mirror of dark and burnished metal and placed it before him. The mirror was held aloft by the muffled hands of a veiled image; and peering within it, Amalzain saw neither his own face nor the face of Sabmon, nor aught of the room itself reflected. And Sabmon enjoined him to watch the mirror closely, and then repaired to a small oratory that was curtained from the chamber with long and queerly painted rolls of camel-parchment.

Watching the mirror, Amalzain was aware that certain of the sendings of Ulua came and went beside him, striving ever to gain his attention with unclean gestures such as harlots use. But resolutely he fixed his eyes on the void and unreflecting metal; and anon he heard the voice of Sabmon chanting without pause the powerful words of an antique formula of exorcism; and now from between the oratory curtains there issued the intolerable pungency of burning spices, such as are employed to drive away demons.

Then Amalzain perceived, without lifting his eyes from the mirror, that the sendings of Ulua had vanished like vapors blown away by the desert wind. But in the mirror a scene limned itself darkly, and he seemed to look on the marble towers of the city of Miraab beneath overlooming bastions of ominous cloud. Then the scene shifted, and he saw the palace hall where Famorgh nodded in wine-stained purple, senile and drunken, amid his ministers and sycophants. Again the mirror changed, and he beheld a room with tapestries of shameless design, where, on a couch of fire-bright crimson, the Princess Ulua sat with her latest lovers amid the fuming of golden thuribles.

Marvelling as he peered within the mirror, Amalzain witnessed a strange thing; for the vapors of the thuribles, mounting thickly and voluminously, took from instant to instant the form of those very apparitions by which he had been bedevilled so long. Ever they rose and multiplied, till the chamber teemed with the spawn of hell and the vomitings of the riven chamel. Between Ulua and the lover at her right hand, who was a captain of the king's guard, there coiled a monstrous lamia, enfolding them both in its serpentine volumes and crushing them with its human bosom; and close at her left hand appeared a half-eaten corpse, leering with lipless teeth, from whose cerements worms were sifted upon Ulua and her second lover, who was a royal equerry. And, swelling like the fumes of some witches' vat, those other abominations pressed about the couch of Ulua with obscene mouthings and fingerings.

At this, like the mark of a hellish branding, horror was printed on the features of the captain and the equerry; and a terror rose in the eyes of Ulua like a pale flame ignited in sunless pits; and her breasts shuddered beneath the breast-cups. And now, in a trice, the mirrored room began to rock violently, and the censers were overturned on the tilting

flags, and the shameless hangings shook and bellied like the blown sails of a vessel in storm. Great cracks appeared in the floor, and beside the couch of Ulua a chasm deepened swiftly and then widened from wall to wall. The whole chamber was riven asunder, and the princess and her two lovers, with all her loathly sendings about them, were hurled tumultuously into the chasm.

After that, the mirror darkened, and Amalzain beheld for a moment the pale towers of Miraab, tossing and falling on heavens black as adamant. The mirror itself trembled, and the veiled image of metal supporting it began to totter and seemed about to fall; and the wattled house of Sabmon shook in the passing earthquake, but, being stoutly built, stood firm while the mansions and palaces of Miraab went down in ruin.

When the earth had ceased its long trembling, Sabmon issued from the oratory.

"It is needless to moralize on what has happened," he said. "You have learned the true nature of carnal desire, and have likewise beheld the history of mundane corruption. Now, being wise, you will turn early to those things which are incorruptible and beyond the world."

Thereafter, till the death of Sabmon, Amalzain dwelt with him and became his only pupil in the science of the stars and the hidden arts of enchantment and sorcery.

Nocturne

By HERBERT KAUFMAN, JR.

Cold, dead clouds in a sodden sky;
Dripping winds, and the voiceless cry
Of things long dead. From the swirling void
Of thoughts, fiend-spawned and self-destroyed,
Black night sables an empty world,
And the moon is dead, and the stars are furled,
The sullen waters heave and swell,
And a sick sea flames with the fires of hell.
The venomous shafts of the driving rain
Strike home, and the heart dissolves in pain:
For the soul of man is pallid and stark,
And ghosts walk abroad in the bellowing dark.
The churning wheels of the spirit mesh,
And the soul grows sick at the touch of the flesh,
And agony shrivels the searing brain
At the ceaseless, battering drum of the rain.

The Sixth Tree*

By EDITH LICHTY STEWART

Police Headquarters,
Los Angeles, California.

Gentlemen:

The coroner's inquest held over the mutilated body of Professor Carhart to account for the baffling circumstances surrounding his death gave the verdict: "Met death at the claws and teeth of some wild beast, presumably a mountain lion."

Considering the prominent and honorary position held by the professor in some of our foremost universities, I felt justified in suppressing the astounding diary, herewith enclosed, found by me in the dead man's room after the inquest.

I submit the diary without comment. Any conclusion derived from its perusal can be only too ghastly and unbelievable.

Respectfully,
J. Donohue, Operative.

AS WE entered the canyon, that dreaded sensation of oppression and suffocation surged upon me and I tore away my collar and lifted the hat from my throbbing head.

There are hypocrites who prate vapidly of the exaltation and exhilaration inspired in the human by these same mountains. Liars! Who should know more of mountains than I, who for thirty years have studied them, chipped away at their exteriors, articulated every rock and stratum in their towering frames, explored and explained their very entrails? Why, I have even proved to myself that they possess a soul, or souls—personality—malignant human emotions. God! What I have suffered!

Is it in revenge for my exhaustive knowledge of them that they torture me so? When night comes—it is night now—they shake from their torpor and become monstrosities crowding closer and closer, stooping to compress the air about my fevered head, crushing into my brain. It is only by ignoring them that I gain relief; so I am writing now in a frenzy to escape them.

As I said, we had entered the canyon. There were only the stage-driver and I. I had been dismissed from the university with only the explanation that my course of study was becoming erratic. Why had I selected the little lodge at the source of this rugged ravine for my retreat? It

*From WEIRD TALES for May, 1924.

should have been the last place in the world for me to seek rest; yet I was here. The gray road twisted its dusty way into the gathering dusk of the mountains. The stage-driver essayed a few conversational stupidities, but I soon silenced his chatter. He looked at me askance and whipped up the horses. The trail turned abruptly. The door behind was closed. Mountains reared about me on either side and a feeling of panic assailed me. I was indeed in the enemy's territory.

An hour passed in silence. Suddenly a bend in the road interrupted the monotony of the scene. With what emotions I beheld a cabin—an adobe cabin crouched back from the road against the hill! Five—no, six—gaunt trees, that might once have been willows, stood in a ghostly row before it. Its windows, glassless and shadeless like the lidless eyes of a skull, leered and peered down at us. A glance had seared it on my mind—and then we had passed it.

"What place was that?"

The driver lashed his horses to greater speed.

"A good place to keep away from after dark."

I waited impatiently for him to volunteer further information, but the fool was evidently sulky. I would wheedle.

"My good man, your reply only arouses my curiosity."

He slowed down. The road lay straight. Turning, I could see the haggard eyes of the house as it watched for the effect the driver's tale would have upon me.

It seems that some years before, after a heavy rain, some hikers had found in front of the deserted cabin five shallow graves, one beneath each tree. Each grave had contained a man. Investigation had identified them as a group of sheep-herders—rough customers at the best. They had evidently spent the night in the cabin, for the place was littered with empty bottles, cards and poker chips.

Who had committed the wholesale murder and buried the bodies was never discovered. Rumor had it that the five sheep-herders had located a mine back in the mountains and had hired a geologist to go with them to assay the ore, but this was never substantiated. There was no one who had actually seen the geologist or knew much about the mine.

"Where are the bodies now?"

The driver shrugged. "Nobody claimed them, so they were thrown back into their graves, the dirt shoveled on again, and left till Judgment Day."

"Well, if they are dead and disposed of till the Day of Judgment, why are you afraid of this place?" I asked with some scorn.

He shook his head darkly. "There's six trees and only five graves under 'em."

"Well?"

"They say there's a curse on this place until the sixth tree has a dead man, too."

"Bah!" I cried. "Nursery tales!"

But I must have spoken strangely, for his long whip curled out over the horses' heads and we swung around the last bend. No longer was the cabin visible, but I knew I would return.

IT MUST have been midnight as I approached the cabin, a midnight that held its breath and waited for something. A hush of expectancy had stilled every sound of the night. I stepped over the graves—one, two, three, four, five. There was no wind, and yet I am sure I heard a rustle, or better, a faint creaking in the naked branches of the sixth tree as I passed beneath it.

Suddenly I halted. My heart swelled and burst into a volley of stifled beatings. There could be no illusion; a wan, lurid glow slowly grew from the sur-

rounding darkness. There was a light within the cabin. Someone was there. I lashed my cowering senses to action and noiselessly approached the window.

Staggering, I clutched the window-ledge for support. The uneven light from a guttering candle secured in an empty bottle disclosed what I had (God help me!) expected to see. They—one, two, three, four, five of them—they were there, the same and yet how horrible! Lifelessly, yet with terrible relentlessness, they played at their everlasting cards. Their dank hair hung in wisps over sunken eyes. The leathery skin of their faces sagged loosely over fleshless skulls. Their clothes hung in tatters, slimed with earth and mud.

And their hands! Fascinated, in terror, I watched those lean, blackened claws deal the mildewed and ragged cards. Their nails, long and broken, scratched over the rough table as they clutched at the chips. They were intent on their game, unaware of my presence. But even as I gratefully assured myself of this their eyes were on me. There was no hate, no fury, no fiendish glee in their expression, rather a blankness, a patient waiting. They had ceased to play. All the waiting in the universe concentrated about me. There was a vacant place beside the dealer. When I could resist no longer, I went within.

The dawn lay pallid on the hills when I flung away from the cabin. There was no sound or motion from the sixth tree as I shrank from its reaching fingers. When clear of it, I ran—ran in the madness of terror to the hotel, locked my door and fell sobbing in wrath and exhaustion on the bed.

I had lost! There was no depth to the agony of my soul. We had played for no obvious stakes, but only too well I knew the prize for which we fought. There would be two more nights of play with two more chances to win. I arose, bathed my scorching brow, and all day I sat figuring, figuring. As a man of science I had often scoffed at the thing called luck, for any game of cards must be reducible to some science or system. Night found me triumphant. Scarcely could I wait for the darkness that I might hasten to their humiliation.

And that night I won! I won, I say! They were waiting for me as before. The cards were dealt, and then I proved that all things are explained by science. A man so learned can hold the world in his hand, immune from the uncertainties of chance and accident!

MY TRIUMPH grew as the dawn approached. I grew reckless. I chuckled. I laughed. I taunted them in their ghastly dead faces. They sat immobile, playing, playing. Their silence infuriated me. I tried to sting them to retort, but my words found answer only in the angry mutterings of the echo from the hollow room. When, as before, the candle choked and expired like a dying man and their wasted forms faded into the shadows of the cabin, I hurled the cards after them and went stumbling and laughing into the morning, drunk with my triumph. As I passed beneath the accursed tree it dared to trail clinging, warmthless fingers across my cheek. I jerked away in loathing and derision. I still can feel the iciness of its touch.

They have asked me, these curious ignorant fools here, where I spend the nights. They talk and whisper about me in little groups that grow silent and disperse when I approach. Well, tonight is the last night, and then I shall be free and far away. If I had not been a man of science and evolved a system, then I might have known defeat; and these gap-

ing fools might have something to fill their empty brains and furnish them with silly chatter. They would find my mutilated body, clawed as though by a mountain lion flung into a shallow grave—beneath the sixth tree.

But I shall not lose! When this night curdles into dawn I shall stuff their filthy graves, stamping the dirt upon them until it fills their mouths and blinds their staring eyes. And the tree? I shall leave it to wring its bony hands for ever in impotent chagrin.

But why am I lingering here? It is time for the game to begin and—they are waiting.

The Star-Gazer Climbs

By HAZEL BURDEN

Bind my hair upon my head,
  Fasten up my shoon;
Tonight I travel far and far
  Toward the golden moon.

Tonight I tread the Milky Way
  On prism paths of stars,
And journey through the Pleiades,
  And set my foot on Mars.

I shall go far on eager feet,
  Straight through the Milky Way,
And scatter star-dust all around
  On those who bid me stay.

But I'll return to earth again,
  Though on reluctant feet,
To walk on patterned paths once more
  In raiment straight and neat.

And you will never know, my dear,
  And you will never care
To climb the heights that I have climbed,
  Or do the deeds I'd dare.

YOU, the readers, seem to have liked the December cover of WEIRD TALES, by M. Brundage, better than any other cover we have had on this magazine; for a veritable chorus of praise rises from the letters of appreciation that the postman has placed on the editor's desk. Some of you, however, think that the cover should have illustrated one of the stories instead of being merely symbolic of the contents.

Good old Jack Darrow, of Chicago, writes to the Eyrie: "As to naked women on your covers, I don't care whether the ladies are nude or wrapped up in big fur coats so long as the covers are *weird*. If the story describes the heroine as being nude, let the artist make her nude, but for weirdness' sake pick out the weirdest scene you can find."

Writes Lionel Dilbeck, of Wichita, Kansas: "*The Lady in Gray* by Donald Wandrei is the best story in months. Also the cover is much better this time, even if it is almost a duplicate of the inside illustration for *The Lair of the Star-Spawn* in the August 1932 issue."

"I love the picture on the cover for December," writes Gertrude M. Carr, of Bremerton, Washington, "but I hunted in vain for the story it represented. Please, please keep the covers by Brundage, though if too much nudity is offensive to some, let the covers be like this one, beautiful and dressed, too."

Maxine Schwartz, of Seattle, writes to the Eyrie: "I have been reading WEIRD TALES for the last year and must say I have enjoyed the stories to the utmost. I have just completed reading your December issue and I want to commend it very highly. I enjoyed every page. I do not, as a rule, care for serials, but *The Vampire Master* by Hugh Davidson has me in its clutches and I simply can't let go."

Michael Liene, of Hazleton, Pennsylvania, writes in part: "I have just laid aside the December issue, with a sense of pleasure and enjoyment that I have not experienced with any other publication printing stories along the policy of WEIRD TALES. I am quite satisfied that, at last, the ideal periodical (though not yet perfect) is on the news stands. Your magazine, to me, is always as pleasant a surprize as buying a bottle of milk and finding it all cream. . . . As for the cover designs: the November and December covers are exquisite. But why doesn't Mr. Brundage, the artist, take an incident out of one of the stories to illustrate? It gives the purchaser of the magazine an idea of the thrills that await him within. Any magazine that has beautiful cover designs and does not have any feature inside the magazine to go with the cover, is trying to sell the magazine by cheating the public."

(Please turn to page 266)

Coming Next Month

A WILD and stifling fear contended with a wilder hope in Phariom's bosom. Trembling, he went toward the table; and a cold clamminess, wrought by the presence of the dead, assailed him. The table was nearly thirty feet in length, and it rose waist-high on a dozen mighty legs. Beginning at the nearer end, he passed along the row of corpses, peering fearfully into each upturned face. Both sexes, and many ages and differing ranks were represented. Nobles and rich merchants were crowded by beggars in filthy rags. Some were newly dead, and others, it seemed, had lain there for days, and were beginning to show the marks of corruption. There were many gaps in the ordered row, suggesting that certain of the corpses had been removed. Phariom went on in the dim light, searching for the loved features of Elaith. At last, when he was nearing the further end, and had begun to fear that she was not among them, he found her.

With the cryptic pallor and stillness of her strange malady upon her, she lay unchanged on the chill stone. A great thankfulness was born in the heart of Phariom, for he felt sure that she was not dead—and that she had not awakened at any time to the horrors of the temple. If he could bear her away from the hateful purlieus without detection, she would recover from her death-simulating sickness. He stooped over to lift her in his arms.

At that moment, he heard a murmur of low voices in the direction of the door by which he had entered the sanctuary. Thinking that some of the priests had returned, he dropped swiftly on hands and knees and crawled beneath the ponderous table, which afforded the only accessible hiding-place. Retreating into shadow, he waited and looked out between the pillar-thick legs.

The voices grew louder, and he saw the curiously sandalled feet and shortish robes of three persons who approached the table of the dead and paused in the very spot where he himself had stood a few instants before. Who they were, he could not surmise; but their garments of light and swarthy red were not the shroudings of Mordiggian's priests. He was uncertain whether or not they had seen him; and crouching in the low space beneath the table, he plucked his dagger from its sheath. . . .

This vivid weird tale of a ghoulish cult and the great black shadow that welled up into hideous being in the temple of Mordiggian will be printed complete in the March number of WEIRD TALES:

THE CHARNEL GOD

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

—ALSO—

THE BLACK GARGOYLE
By HUGH B. CAVE

A tale of goose-flesh horror in the jungles of Borneo—a story of stark terror and the strange doom of an evil white man.

WINGED DEATH
By HAZEL HEALD

An eery story of the frightful punishment that overtook a scientist who bred poisonous African insects to kill his friend.

THUNDERING WORLDS
By EDMOND HAMILTON

A colossal thrill-tale of the distant future, when our Earth and the other planets leave the dying sun on a stupendous voyage to distant stars in search of light and heat.

THE CLENCHED HAND
By STUART STRAUSS

An unusual story of a bronze fist and the weird train of circumstances surrounding a mysterious murder in a New Orleans artist's studio.

GRAY WORLD
By PAUL ERNST

Gregor awoke to a terrifying gray dawn, in which there was no color, and life was terribly changed. A story that you will long remember.

March WEIRD TALES Out March 1

(Continued from page 264)

"I commend you highly on your choice of M. Brundage as a cover artist," writes Robert Leonard Russell, of Mount Vernon, Illinois. "Brundage is absolutely magnificent. Your last seven covers are the best, the weirdest that have ever graced good old WT. The black backgrounds give a positively bizarre effect. However, it seems that covers ought to illustrate the lead-off story. Your December issue was one of the best you have ever published. I was delighted to see a story by E. F. Benson, who has, sadly, been missing from your pages for a long, long time. Benson is one of the modern masters of the weird tale. I like Howard's Conan stories, but I prefer good old Solomon Kane, Howard's earlier brain-child. Run more ghost stories, tales of ghouls, elementals, whimsical fantasies, and less corporeal, adventurous stories. Have more stories of the goose-pimple inducing type. And how about a few stories with settings in the past, and more 'timeless' ones like *The Ox-Cart* by Frank Owen? *The Lady in Gray* was the best story in the December number."

A letter from Guy Detrick, of Big Prairie, Ohio, says: "WEIRD TALES scored a breath-taking hit with me again, especially with the third installment of *The Vampire Master*, by Hugh Davidson. That in itself was worth the price of the magazine. It is just the kind of story I like. Davidson is certainly to be praised. Why not have another one soon by Hugh B. Cave?" [Mr. Detrick will be happy to know that the cover design in next month's issue will be based on a story by Mr. Cave, entitled *The Black Gargoyle*.—THE EDITORS.]

"Cut out the cheap sensational covers," writes Huthbert K. Greely, of Philadelphia. "This month's cover is colorful and attractive without the help of nudity. Are you proselytizing for the nudists?"

"I like WEIRD TALES," writes H. H. Blade, of San Francisco. "It is a grand magazine and I've read it for as long as I can remember, though I have never written a fan letter before. The best story you ever published was *Revelations in Black*, by Carl Jacobi, which certainly made a great impression on me. That story was different from anything I have ever read, and I am wondering why you don't have more tales by this author. By all means start an Author's Page in the back of the magazine, and let Mr. Jacobi be the first one to tell about himself." [We certainly do intend to publish more stories by Carl Jacobi. One of them is already scheduled for our April issue.—THE EDITORS.]

A letter from J. B. Dixon, of Little Rock, Arkansas, says: "For some time I have intended writing to commend your covers by Brundage, but kept putting it off until the December cover came along and broke down even my procrastination. At last a cover worthy of the masterpieces published in WEIRD TALES! A cover that combines the unusual with beauty, and with that gorgeous breath-taking use of color that is Brundage's specialty. For years I saw WEIRD TALES wearing covers that lamentably failed to measure up to its contents. I had come to the conclusion that pictorial art was not equal to the task and that you should adopt a standard cover, plain, or with at most a symbolic decoration—and then along came Brundage. I have but one objection to this genius of weird art: the grotesque malproportions of many of his female figures. As a particular case in point, consider the inflated bust of the figure on the November cover. My first choice among your authors is Clark Ashton

(Please turn to page 268)

BACK COPIES

Because of the many requests for back numbers of WEIRD TALES, the publishers do their best to keep a sufficient supply on hand to meet all demands. This magazine was established in early 1923 and there has been a steady drain on the supply of back copies ever since. At present, we have the following back numbers on hand for sale:

1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933
Jan.	Jan.	----	Jan.	Jan.	Jan.
Feb.	Feb.	----	Feb.-Mar.	Feb.	Feb.
Mar.	Mar.	Mar.		----	Mar.
Apr.	Apr.	Apr.	Apr.-May	Apr.	Apr.
----	May	----		----	May
June	June	----	Jun.-Jul.	June	June
July	July	July		July	July
Aug.	----	----	Aug.	Aug.	Aug.
Sept.	Sept.	Sept.	----	Sept.	Sept.
Oct.	----	----	Oct.	Oct.	Oct.
Nov.	----	----	Nov.	Nov.	Nov.
Dec.	----	Dec.	Dec.	Dec.	Dec.

These back numbers contain many fascinating stories. If you are interested in obtaining any of the back numbers on this list please hurry your order because we can not guarantee that the list will be as complete as it now is within the next 30 days. The price on all back copies is 25c per copy. Mail all orders to:

WEIRD TALES

840 N. Michigan Ave. **Chicago, Illinois**

(Continued from page 266)

Smith. He excels in that particular which makes the weird tale weird—atmosphere. His seemingly unlimited vocabulary, combined with his uncanny feeling for the use of adjectives, never fails to create a sense of being cast adrift from the palpable world on every side. In this difficult art he excels Poe. And I must add my vote to the already overwhelming majority in favor of Seabury Quinn and the inimitable Jules de Grandin. Hail to *Shambleau,* by C. L. Moore, in the November issue. That is a tale which stands out as a fit companion to any of the classics of weird literature. In the December issue I pick *King Cobra,* by Joseph O. Kesselring, as winner by three lengths. I don't care for serials; their disconnected episodes fail to sustain that atmosphere so necessary to the weird tale."

E. L. Mengshoel, of Minneapolis, writes to the Eyrie: "My hearty compliments for your December issue. It ends the year's publication with a real acme number, and deserves applause. In the whole issue there is not a single unfascinating story, and some of the tales are spellbinders. I am indeed at a loss how to point out any single one as the 'best' and the 'next best,' because every one seems the 'best,' each in its own peculiar way. I might say, however, that Donald Wandrei's *The Lady in Gray* had a weirdness that was particularly 'goose-fleshy' in its gruesome materializing dreams. Frank Owen's *The Ox-Cart* presented weirdness with poetic beauty. The resourceful Seabury Quinn in his *Red Gauntlets of Czerni* shows his 'weird' familiarity with the characters of widely different nationalities and at the same time delights us with again meeting that precious Monsieur Jules, whose original bon-mots and hyperboles, ludicrous oaths and droll expressions are no less fascinating than his stunts in occultism. And all the rest of the stories, too many to mention, were real thrillers."

J. D. Arden, of Detroit, writes to the Eyrie: "Thanks for the Frank Owen story in the current WEIRD TALES. It has been a long time since we have had something from Mr. Owen's masterly pen. I shall never forget his exquisite little Chinese fantasies—*The Blue City, The Purple Sea,* and *The Tinkle of the Camel's Bell.* These are real classics. The cover is a beauty and in keeping with the Yuletide. That red candle does it. This time Mr. Brundage must surely satisfy everybody—except those naughty nudists who prefer naked women on the cover. Just so we won't have to hear any more cheers and groans in the Eyrie regarding the covers, I suggest that you have our puzzled Mr. Brundage draw three covers each month: a nice cover, a naughty cover, and a bad cover. The nice covers would portray only ladies with all their clothes on; the naughty covers would be sort of Mae Westish—partly clothed; and last but not least, the bad cover, which would have the ladies pictured without any clothes on. This arrangement would satisfy everybody, and no one would have cause to complain. He or she would simply have to buy WEIRD TALES with the type of cover he or she prefers."

"The stories in WEIRD TALES of late have been so uniformly good that I have hesitated to pick out any particular one as especially deserving of praise, and there has been little to condemn," writes George N. Heflick, of Mantua, Ohio. "I am taking the liberty, however, of entering into two or three of the controversies that the Eyrie has been featuring recently. First, the question of interplanetary stories. I enjoy a good story of this type very much, and should be sorry indeed to see them entirely

(Please turn to page 270)

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Name _____ Address _____

(Continued from page 268)

discontinued. However, I think it a good idea to follow your present policy of limiting them to not more than one in each issue, devoting the rest of your space to stories that conform more closely to the definition of 'supernatural and uncanny'. Now as to the nudes on your covers: let me add my vote to those of your readers who have requested their utter elimination. No prude, I feel that there is a place for nakedness, but that place is emphatically *not* on the cover of a weird fiction magazine. Your covers for the last three months, while not nudes, show little improvement. Half clad, in such a manner as to reveal rather than conceal, is no better than unclad. The sex idea is still there, and the idea of nudity is increasing among your interior illustrations at an alarming rate. You are making a grave mistake by continuing this policy. You are simply playing to the depraved tastes of a group of morons who subsist on the filth of that literary cesspool, sex literature. Being attracted by your sexy covers, they will buy one issue in the hope that the contents are in keeping therewith, and being disappointed, will not come back. Meanwhile, you will have fallen considerably in the esteem of those who read your magazine in search of a thrill, not an aphrodisiac. I agree with A. B. Leonard that the pictures usually illustrate a dramatic incident in one of the stories; but I am sure that if Mr. Brundage will examine the contents of each issue thoroughly, he can find plenty of dramatic incidents which do not center upon either an unclad or a half-clad woman. The true craftsman of weird fiction does not need to strip his characters in order to focus the reader's attention upon them."

Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue of WEIRD TALES? Three stories are in an exact tie as your favorite in our December issue, as shown by your votes and letters: *Red Gauntlets of Czerni* by Seabury Quinn, *Abd Dhulma, Lord of Fire*, by G. G. Pendarves, and *The Lady in Gray* by Donald Wandrei.

My favorite stories in the February WEIRD TALES are:

Story	Remarks
(1)----------	----------
(2)----------	----------
(3)----------	----------

I do not like the following stories:

(1)----------	Why?----------
(2)----------	----------

It will help us to know what kind of stories you want in Weird Tales if you will fill out this coupon and mail it to The Eyrie, Weird Tales, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Reader's name and address:

The Solitary Hunters

(Continued from page 252)

a convict hugged securely to her shining breast. She seemed to carry her prey with the tarsal hook of her second pair of legs, the first and third pair being free for the walking she would have to do on entering the tunnel.

As far as I could ascertain, five convicts were caught on that first raid. The food remained for the most part untouched. Gradually the men came out, peered into the sky, made a run for the food platform, grabbed a handful of food and ran like mad back to their huts.

King was depressed. He was just realizing what I had feared from the beginning. There had been a picture of a man running, with a wasp after him. And I thought it was a fake!

"I think that I understand this part of it," the boss admitted. "I am no entomologist, but there is no doubt that these females turn carnivorous at a certain part of their lives. Here is lots of fresh meat, specially fattened for their benefit. Ugh." He shook his shoulders. "It makes me feel bad. I saw a boa constrictor swallow a pig once, and it made me feel the same way, when the pig squealed. Do they eat them alive, Prince?"

"No. That is the worst part of it. They don't kill them and they don't eat them. They just sting them and inject a poison that stuns them, makes them unable to move, and that is when the end comes to them, a rather nasty and unpleasant end, but, fortunately, they are not able to realize it. At least, I hope they are not, but I don't know for sure. Perhaps the fact that their muscles are paralyzed is no evidence that they can not

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think, or appreciate their surrounding."

King started to pace up and down the little hut.

"I can not stand it any longer, Prince. I am no coward, but I am not going to wait here and starve to death or die the way you say. An idea came to me a few days ago and here is where I make use of it. Did you notice those galvanized iron cans on the food platform? They come up full, and, if the boys get a chance, they go down empty. They are big things and have a tight cover. I am going down in one."

"Yes?"

"And down there, in some way, I am going to get into the big house."

Thrills and sensations a-plenty await you in the concluding chapters of this story in next month's WEIRD TALES.

The Lantern

By HUNG LONG TOM

Before me
Lies a silk
And paper lantern.
The table is teakwood
With pearl inlaid,
The lantern shaped
Like a pagoda.
And as I gaze thereon
A little lady
Walks slowly
Down the steps
And bows before me.
There is no light
Within the lantern burning.
The light is from the eyes
Of my Pagoda Girl.

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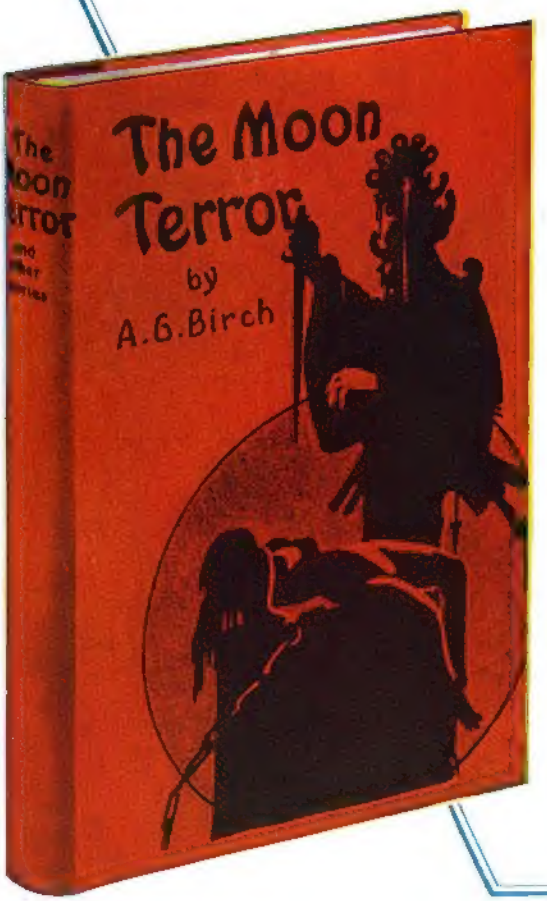

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